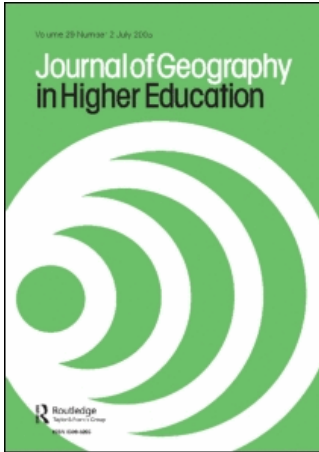


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### The Challenges and Opportunities of Foreign-born Instructors in the Classroom

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## The Challenges and Opportunities of Foreign-born Instructors in the Classroom

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**ABSTRACT** *Foreign-born instructors are an integral part of the US education system. While universities see them as contributing to internationalization, many students, parents and legislators are concerned about their impact on students' educational achievement. Supported by data collected from students and professors, the author identifies the main problems students experience with foreign-born instructors, as well as the main challenges foreign-born instructors face in adjusting to the US education system. Recommendations are developed aimed at improving classroom interactions between American students and foreign-born instructors and it is shown how the instructor's 'foreignness' can be an important teaching resource, particularly in disciplines such as geography.*

**KEY WORDS:** International instructors, classroom interaction, teaching resource

### Introduction

In a panel discussion at the 2004 Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers a number of foreign-born professors recounted stories of challenges they faced as non-American geography instructors. While some cases were highly specific and unlikely to be representative of the experiences of foreign-born professors in general, many comments struck a chord with those present. These included difficulties in adjusting to different academic standards, grading systems and student behaviour. Most participants regretted that there was little support available to foreign-born instructors that could help them avoid problems due to their 'foreignness' or deal with them when they arose. The session ended with the panellists and audience discussing how to support international instructors and how to raise awareness of the issue within the wider geography community.

Since then, articles have appeared in a variety of newspapers describing a different dimension of this issue—situations in which American students felt disadvantaged because their instructors were not American. Some of these reports prompted attempts at drafting new legislation, aimed at solving the 'problem with foreign professors'. It became

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increasingly clear that the issue of foreign-born instructors in the classroom had to be investigated from the perspectives of both students and professors. In this paper, I identify the main challenges both parties face, and provide a set of recommendations aimed at improving classroom experiences for both students and professors. I developed all recommendations presented in this paper based on the responses I received from students and instructors in the course of my study; similar advice is given by Sarkisian (2000) and Wu (2003). While most of this paper looks at foreign-born professors in a variety of academic disciplines, I also discuss how the instructors' 'foreignness' can be a valuable resource in teaching geography.

### **Background**

The issue of foreign-born instructors has triggered debates at various times in a variety of educational contexts. In the 1980s there was a flurry of articles expressing concern that the education of American students was suffering because of foreign-born teaching assistants. In the 1990s the debate died down, but in recent years an increasing number of students, parents and legislators have complained about and taken action against foreign-born teaching assistants and now also foreign-born professors (Neves & Sanyal, 1991; Clayton, 2000). In an effort to appease students and parents, numerous states and universities have implemented guidelines requiring non-native English-speaking instructors to undergo tests of spoken English before they are allowed to teach (Clayton, 2000; Finder, 2005).

In 2005, Bette Grande, a Republican state representative from North Dakota, heated up the discussion by drafting legislation stating that students who complained in writing that their instructor "did not speak English clearly and with good pronunciation" could drop the class and get their tuition refunded. Furthermore, if more than 10 per cent of the students in a class filed a complaint, the university would be obligated to remove the instructor from his or her teaching position (Finder, 2005; Gravois, 2005). While there is some empirical support for the theory that, in certain circumstances, foreign-born instructors may have a negative impact on the academic performance of undergraduates (e.g. Borjas, 2000), several scholars conclude that the problem may not be the accent of the instructors, but the fact that American students are not used to—or are unwilling to—adjust to non-native speakers of English. They may sometimes use the language issue as a means of expressing prejudices and stereotypes.

Neves & Sanyal (1991) showed that, in general, American students rated their foreign-born instructors highly as regards their knowledge and social skills, but gave them poor marks for communication skills and teaching ability. Interestingly, older students, international students and students with higher grade-point averages generally found foreign-born instructors to be as effective in teaching as native-born instructors, lending support to the idea that the blame should not be placed exclusively on foreign-born instructors' English skills, but also on students' attitudes towards foreign-born professors. Clayton (2000) commented that American students often complain about foreign-born instructors whose English is excellent, further supporting that non-linguistic factors are at work as well. In a similar vein, Rubin (1992) found that students' perceptions of the strength of an instructor's accent correlated only weakly with how strong the accent actually was (as measured by linguists). He also showed that students perceived an accent as stronger when the instructor was of a different ethnicity than the students, even if the instructor in fact spoke standard American English. As this short discussion shows, the

public perception that foreign-born professors are to be blamed for communication problems in the classroom is not well supported by empirical data. Rather, the attitudes of American students towards foreign-born instructors determine at least in part how successful classroom interactions are.

While public discussion focuses almost exclusively on issues of accent and 'problems' with foreign-born instructors, the academic debate is more concerned with what kind of support foreign-born instructors should receive in order to make them effective teachers, and what they can contribute to their institutions. The different attitude towards foreign-born instructors is also evident in how they are labelled—in the academic context, they are almost always referred to as 'international faculty' or 'international teaching assistants', while in the public debate they are typically called 'foreign professors'.

Some universities make online or print materials available to international instructors aimed at easing their adjustment to the US education system (e.g. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1998; University of Virginia, 2004; University of California, Irvine, 2007). These materials explain characteristics of the American education system and give advice on how to deal with linguistic and cultural differences. Unfortunately, these examples are the exception rather than the rule, with few resources available to international instructors at most institutions. To my knowledge, Sarkisian's *Teaching American Students* (2000) is the only published handbook available giving advice to international faculty and teaching assistants. Only a few universities have training or mentoring programmes specifically aimed at foreign-born instructors (Moody, 2004; Gravois, 2005). Solem & Foote (2004) argue that mentoring is an important tool in helping new professors make the difficult transition from graduate student to faculty. Unfortunately, many have to make this transition without institutional support. Moody (2004) confirms that this transition is even more difficult for foreign-born instructors, who also have to adjust to a different classroom culture.

To date, most academic studies have focused on one single aspect of the wider issues surrounding foreign-born instructors in the classroom—usually the accent, but occasionally also issues of cross-cultural communication (e.g. Kuhn, 1996). Few studies have looked at a range of factors, and even fewer have examined these issues from the perspectives of both the students and the instructors with Wu (2003) being a notable exception. I seek to address this gap by providing much-needed empirical data, and developing recommendations for foreign-born instructors and their institutions based on the challenges identified by students and instructors.

### Research Methods

In order to explore adequately the topic of foreign-born instructors in the classroom, I employed a two-part method. I asked over 300 undergraduate students at a mid-sized university in the Midwest to write essays about their opinions of foreign-born professors. I did not give them any concrete questions to answer, but encouraged them to write about any experiences they had had with foreign-born instructors, and to be honest in their answers. At that time, these students took introductory geography classes from a European professor, but the students were encouraged to comment about all foreign-born professors from whom they had taken classes, regardless of the academic discipline. I analysed the 272 essays I received quantitatively (to assess how often a certain topic was brought up) and qualitatively (to get a better understanding of individual experiences). In order to assure that students would be honest with their answers, I did not ask them to provide any



information that might allow me to identify them. As such, I cannot distinguish among students based on characteristics such as gender, class status or major in my analysis.

In addition to gathering data from students, I interviewed a dozen foreign-born geography professors from both smaller universities (nine interviewees) and large research institutions (three interviewees) in the Midwest. In total, eight different universities were represented. I asked three main questions and then followed up on the interviewees' answers. The first core question inquired what kind of comments—positive or negative—professors had received from students about their 'foreignness'. The second question asked professors to give concrete examples of challenges they faced as foreign-born geography instructors. The third question asked professors what kind of support from colleagues or institutions they would find helpful to address these challenges. While I talked to 10 of these instructors in person, two responded to my questions by email. For reasons of confidentiality, I list only the professors' continent (not country) of origin and do not include any information about their area of interest within geography.

### **Language Issues**

As expected, professors' foreign accents were the largest area of concern for the students in my sample. In fact, several students reported that other students advised them specifically not to take classes with foreign-born professors because of an accent:

When scheduling classes, make sure your professor's name sounds American', I was told by several of my friends who were already in college. 'Why should I do this?' I asked them, a bit confused. They told me that it is way too hard to understand foreign professors.

Several students reported having received similar advice "because school is already hard enough without having to struggle with trying to understand what your professor is saying".

The vast majority of my respondents (82 per cent) mentioned language as an important factor distinguishing foreign-born from American-born professors. However, there was a lot of variation in how much they thought that it influenced their understanding or learning. A few students (less than 1 per cent) reported cases where they quite literally could not understand a word their foreign-born professor was saying. One student recounted:

I had a professor from Africa whose accent was as bad as it can get. Nobody in the class could understand what he was saying. Perhaps the most distracting thing about this particular instructor was that he said 'OK' about 100 times an hour. I know this because this was the only word I could understand.

A few students also felt that their professors' vocabulary was not sufficient to explain things clearly: "Another problem that I run into is the lack of range the teacher has for vocabulary. I understand that it is tough for foreigners to learn English, but if you are going to be a professor you should be able to get your point across clearly." Three students commented that professors with insufficient English skills should not be allowed to teach.

I truly believe that if a professor is not easy to understand they should not be allowed to teach. What is the point of doing a lecture when nobody has a clue of what is being



said? I believe any credible university should know better than to hire professors that cannot clearly speak the English language.

Although a few students in this study reported major comprehension problems, the vast majority (over 70 per cent) said that the accent of their foreign-born professors initially made understanding harder for them, but that they eventually adjusted, often much to their own surprise. For example, one student observed:

When our foreign professor told us that it wouldn't be long before we wouldn't have a problem understanding her, I had a hard time believing that. I thought for certain that this would be the worst class I had ever taken. I soon learnt that this was not true, and I do not have any problems understanding her any more.

Some students realized that rather than seeing the accent as a burden, trying to adjust to it could be a learning experience in itself. One student commented that:

Many students complain about a foreign professor because they cannot understand him or her. Is that really the professor's fault? Most certainly not. The problem is that students are not exposed to accents enough so that they have not learnt to deal with them. In the 'real world' we will be expected to work and deal with people who do not have English as their native language. The more exposure we get to different accents the better.

In fact, several students stated that they actually enjoyed having an instructor with a foreign accent. In some cases, this was because the student had a connection to a certain language and therefore enjoyed hearing that particular accent. For example, several students were used to their professor's German accent because their grandparents were from Germany or commented that hearing it brought back memories of being stationed in Germany with the US army. Other students just "liked the accent". Contrary to students who found that "having to decipher another accent" made learning harder, half a dozen students commented that it actually helped them pay attention to the lecture. One student representing this point of view said:

I can clearly understand my foreign teacher and enjoy when she pronounces words differently than I do. Since I have a three-hour night class I find that I start to zone out and not pay attention. Then my teacher will pronounce a word differently and my attention is drawn back to figure out what she just said.

The wide range of student comments about the language issue lends support to the claim that it is often not the accent per se that has a negative impact on learning, but that the students' attitudes towards the accent play an important role in determining their classroom experiences (cf. Rubin, 1992).

Comments from various students indicated that how the professor handled the language issue influenced how they felt about it to a great degree. In general, students resented it when a professor simply assumed that they could understand and appreciated it when the professor acknowledged early on in the class that his or her accent made understanding harder. Many students also liked it when professors tried to help them deal with



comprehension problems: “Professors with accents were generally aware of the fact that students find it difficult to understand them. This causes the professors to take the time to be sure that students understand what is being said and meant.” Many students appreciated instructors providing extensive notes on transparencies or PowerPoint presentations, so that they could see a word even if they could not understand the professor’s pronunciation of it. In addition to the professor providing help, a dozen students also valued being able to help the professor.

Another advantage of having a foreign professor is that we can both learn things from each other. Of course we learn many things from our geography professor, but she can also learn things from us. She asks us how to pronounce words and about the culture in America. It works well to have a mutual understanding in the class.

Just as the students felt that language was the main issue, so did the foreign-born professors themselves. However, professors in my sample talked less about their accent, which they felt that the students had to adjust to, and more about their frustration with not being able to express themselves in the way they wanted. One African professor, for example, said: “Language is my major problem. I am bad at languages. I lack the ease to express myself in English, and I do not master it as well as I want.” All professors I talked to except the instructor quoted above felt that these problems were temporary, and did not present major challenges after some time in the US.

As this section shows, students consider language issues the main factor in complicating classroom interactions. However, there was a wide range of answers concerning how much the accent hindered their learning, with the vast majority of the students at most reporting temporary difficulties, indicating that the accent is only rarely a major long-term obstacle. Foreign-born professors can improve communication by acknowledging that their accent may make comprehension harder to students and provide extensive notes to help students understand them better (Table 1). However, all the professors’ efforts are in vain if the students do not make an attempt to understand them. As one student said:

I really have no idea why our society makes foreign professors such a controversy. In all reality they are just like everyone else. In many ways the fault lies within the

**Table 1.** Recommendations for foreign-born professors: preparing for students

- 
- Be upfront with the students. Acknowledge that your English is not perfect, that you don’t know all the words, and that you may mispronounce some words
  - Encourage students to raise their hands if they don’t understand you. Many students are shy about interrupting the professor, so make it clear that you want them to let you know when they don’t understand
  - Make sure that you speak slowly. The faster you speak the harder it is for the students to understand you
  - Especially in lecture-style classes, prepare extensive notes that the students can read on the blackboard or screen so they can see the words even if they don’t recognize your pronunciation
  - Tell students that learning is a two-way street—you will help them learn the subject matter, and you want to learn the language from them
  - Assign ‘language police’—students who are responsible for correcting you or helping you out with words you don’t know. They will be less shy about correcting you when they have been assigned to do the job, and often enjoy teaching you something.
-



Americans themselves, not being able to adjust and accept foreign professors. The problem at hand is not whether foreign professors are good or bad—it is whether or not Americans come to accept them.

The data from this study indicate that while there may be a few foreign-born instructors whose English is insufficient for effective teaching, public debates overemphasize these rare cases (cf. Neves & Sanyal, 1991). By stigmatizing foreign-born professors as poor English speakers harming American students' educational achievement, these reports give students an excuse to complain rather than an incentive to accept foreign-born professors.

### **Classroom Interactions**

Just over 10 per cent of my student respondents noted that foreign-born professors have different teaching styles and interact with students differently. For some students this is an advantage. One student, for example, stated, "A foreign professor will know two teaching styles and can combine them". For others, however, it is difficult to adjust to the different styles: "Many cultures have different education systems and ways of teaching, and students in America may have a hard time adapting to these foreign concepts and ideas." While several students stated that they saw differences, they did not provide any concrete examples, with the exception of testing. As one student observed, among her foreign-born professors, "It seems that the tests are not just given to recite facts, but have a lot more to do with interpretation and reading between the lines". Related to these expectations in terms of critical thinking skills, another student suggested that American students might avoid foreign-born instructors because of the higher expectations they bring to the classroom:

Students with foreign professors may fear the type of work they have to do. Being graded on a higher level may not necessarily be a bad thing in that it makes students apply themselves more to their studies; however, it could also induce students who do not want to work hard to not want to take classes with foreign professors.

One reason that few students commented about differences in teaching style may be that most foreign-born professors have received at least part of their training in the US, and are therefore familiar with American styles of teaching. In addition, almost none of the students distinguished between differences in teaching style that could be attributed to the fact that the professor received part of his or her training in another country as opposed to those that are simply expressions of different personalities or teaching philosophies. The fact that students link certain characteristics (good or bad) to the 'foreignness' of the professor is a major problem, as it makes it harder to identify and address problems if they exist. For example, in the quote above the student suggested that foreign-born professors are grading to higher standards. However, this is not true of all foreign-born professors. In addition, these differences also exist among US-born instructors.

The professors, by contrast, had a lot to say about differences in teaching. Almost all professors stated that they were not used to multiple-choice examinations, since in their countries of origin essay exams or oral tests were usually used to assess critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Three foreign-born professors' comments centred on how difficult they found it to develop multiple-choice exams. One European professor, for

example, recounted, "It took me a while to learn to write proper questions. So in the beginning I used the test bank provided by the publisher, but students criticized me for the poor wording of the questions." For the professors who talked about multiple-choice exams, however, the main challenge was not that they found writing multiple-choice questions difficult, but that they simply did not believe that this was a good way to test students. The European professors, in particular, complained that the American education system is too much geared towards regurgitating facts rather than interpreting or discussing information, forming independent opinions and problem-solving, a criticism shared by many of their American colleagues.

Practically all foreign-born professors were shocked at how little background knowledge most American students bring with them from high school. This was considered a particularly severe problem in geography as it is so rarely taught in school. As one European professor put it, "The students are much less knowledgeable about the world than the average European student. They did not have any geography at all in school, so you have to start at zero." While four professors saw this lack of background knowledge as an outcome of the absence of geography from the school curriculum and a general indifference of Americans towards events taking place outside North America, two blamed university admission policies. A European professor was taken aback by the "all-inclusiveness of American universities. Here almost everybody goes to college, no matter whether they are qualified for academic work or not." In her opinion, this may have something to do with the undervaluation of vocational training as an alternative to a university education. However, while all professors were frustrated about the knowledge and skills of their students, three pointed out that the range of student abilities is much wider in the United States than in their home countries. A European professor teaching at a prestigious research university said:

My teaching here required quite a bit of adjustment. Generally I have to 'dumb down' both my style and expectations of background knowledge. Literacy is on the decline everywhere in the Western world, but sometimes it feels like the weakest end of the undergraduate student body in the US cannot decline any further. Yet the smartest undergraduates are astonishingly brilliant and top many of the Master's students I worked with in Europe.

Many foreign-born professors also found it difficult to adjust to student behaviour in the United States. Two-thirds of the instructors interviewed stated that they considered it inappropriate that some American students wear baseball caps, pyjamas or shabby clothing to class. Three were particularly frustrated with what they described as a general lack of respect for the professor. Frequently cited examples included students not attending class, reading newspapers or eating in class, or falling asleep during lectures. African and Asian professors were also shocked that students would challenge professors, while European professors generally welcomed this as a sign of independent thinking.

Foreign-born professors were often particularly frustrated about students feeling entitled to receive a good grade. A European professor said that, "American students expect that because they devoted a certain amount of time to an assignment or studying for a test, they deserve a certain grade", even if the work they submitted clearly does not meet the required standards. Three professors also commented that some students felt that they

had a right to receive a good grade simply because they were paying for their education. An African professor with experience in the European system summed these points up as follows:

In the European and African education systems there is no mercy. There is no kindness there, but here professors lower standards to please the students. Here school is like a business where the students are the customers, while in most European countries education is free or almost free. In these countries, people do not care how many people graduate and how well they do, but here the schools are competing for students. In Europe and Africa the only thing universities are interested in is to make people competent. If you are not competent, you don't graduate. Here you want to please the student, so it is a different scenario.

Six foreign-born professors were also surprised at how frequently students would try to get their grades adjusted or expect extra credit assignments when they had not done as well in a class as they had hoped. Interestingly, Scheyvens *et al.* (2003) report that international students identified many of the same issues as the professors in this study.

While some American students notice differences in the style of teaching and interacting with students between their foreign-born and American-born professors, the professors struggle more with trying to adjust to the American system. Even though they may not agree with some practices, they recognize that they are the ones having to make most of the adjustments since they are teaching in the US. Most believe in "adjusting to the system without sacrificing your own principles", as one professor put it (Table 2). In order to make these adjustments, however, foreign-born professors need support (Table 3). They have to have access to information about the US education system before starting their

**Table 2.** Recommendations for foreign-born professors: adjusting expectations

- 
- Get as much information about the US education system and your particular institution as possible before you start your job. If possible, sit in on classes taught by experienced professors to get a feeling for how classes are run in the United States
  - Accept that standards or approaches may be quite different from those in your home country. Ask other faculty for examples of tests, assignments and syllabi to get an idea of what the expectations are at your institution. (Remember that there is also considerable diversity in standards among US universities, so there is no general rule). Ask if anything is unclear—as we always tell our students, there is no such thing as a dumb question
  - Don't let the students push you around. Students are likely to try to talk you into lowering standards. Talk to other professors before you make any adjustments
  - If you feel you need to make adjustments, don't give up your standards completely. You have to adjust to the prevailing standard to some degree so that you do not alienate students, but try to train them gently to accept your ideas
  - Clearly explain expectations in the syllabus and in the introduction to the class. The syllabus is your contract with the students. For example, if students are told from the beginning that exams will not be graded on a normal curve and no extra credit assignments will be given, they are more likely to accept these policies
  - Impose the '24-hour rule': Tell students that you will not accept any complaints about grades in the 24 hours after you return the test or assignment. This allows students to cool down and forces them to think more carefully about why they think they deserve more points
  - Build up a network with other foreign-born professors to exchange information and get support in case you experience serious difficulties with students due to your 'foreignness'
-



**Table 3.** Recommendations for institutions

- 
- Be prepared that foreign-born professors come in with different expectations. Make sure that they are made aware of the standards at your institution concerning grading scales, exam format, workload, etc.
  - Provide general information about the American education system. Foreign-born professors coming straight from their home countries may not be familiar with terms and concepts such as 'curving grades' or 'extra credit assignments'
  - Provide mentors for new foreign-born faculty. Ideally, there should be an American mentor as well as a foreign-born mentor who can better understand the struggles non-American professors go through
  - Allow and encourage foreign-born instructors to sit in on a few class sessions taught by an American professor so that they can get an impression of the teaching style and how students behave in the classroom
  - Make sure that students are told during their orientation that they may be taught by foreign-born professors. Point out that it is important that students approach foreign-born professors with an open mind and make an effort to understand. Tell them about the benefits they can get from having non-American instructors, so that they develop a positive expectation
- 

jobs at American universities and someone to turn to for advice as they discover and try to adjust to more differences or face particular challenges.

#### **'Foreignness' as a Teaching Resource**

While some students in my sample saw the 'foreignness' of their professors as a disadvantage when it came to understanding their lectures, many found advantages to having professors who grew up outside the United States, especially when these instructors taught subjects such as geography, international studies or history. Some 64 per cent of my respondents stated that they enjoyed their foreign-born professors teaching about their home countries or regions. Many students commented that they felt the information they were getting from foreign-born professors about their home countries was "more credible" or "more real" than that which they could get from books or American-born professors. One student commented, "It is great to hear my professor talk about events that happened in her home country because she was there when it happened. It's like getting two different sides to a story because one is from books and one is from real life." Many students also liked the personal touch professors could add to their teaching about their home country (Table 4). For instance, anecdotal evidence suggests that many students taking World

**Table 4.** Recommendations for foreign-born professors: using 'foreignness'

- 
- Make your 'foreignness' a resource for your teaching. Most students love to hear about first-hand experiences, and appreciate getting an insight into what your life was like when you lived in your home country
  - That being said, don't overdo it. Students get tired of hearing too much about a country that they are not connected to. Make sure that you provide a critical perspective on your home country
  - Tell students that you will help them learn about your home country, but that you also want to learn more about the US to stimulate interaction
  - Offer students the opportunity to come to your office hours simply to chat about your home country. There are always students who want to know more but do not dare to ask a question in class
-

Regional Geography classes pick the world region their professor is from as their favourite region. Many of the foreign-born professors likewise reported that they got positive feedback from students when they taught about their home countries. Several professors said that occasionally students come to their office hours just to chat about their home countries, especially when their own heritage happens to be similar.

While most students appreciated hearing about their professors' home countries, even in classes such as mathematics or computer science, and considered it enriching to be exposed to other viewpoints and examples than those in the textbook, a small number of students (four) considered it problematic when professors talked about their home countries too much. One student stated, "I think there is a very thin line that foreign professors have to dance on. It is a line of teaching students about their culture or religion while not preaching it. I think most foreign professors realize this and dance that line quite efficiently."

In addition to getting first-hand information about other places from their foreign-born professors, more than half of my student respondents (58 per cent) commented that a non-American professor had exposed them to a different perspective. Many students stated that it did not really matter whether their professor was foreign-born or not when he or she taught subjects like mathematics, computer science or biology, but that they saw significant differences in subjects such as history or geography. These students felt that being exposed to a different point of view from the "stereotypical American" one was an enriching experience. For example, students remarked that foreign-born professors could help students see world events from a different perspective, as expressed in the following quote:

A foreign professor often has a different perspective on issues. For example, if we [the US] go to another country to 'help' them economically or militarily, we see this as a positive thing. People from other countries may see this as unnecessary or wrong. While our professor isn't biased or says that the US was wrong, we do get to hear from a person who has lived in another country and knows how this country views our decisions and actions.

Several students (12 per cent) commented that they felt that in their high school years they were exposed only to "American interpretations" of world events, but now got to hear different interpretations:

I love the different viewpoints that foreign professors bring to the table. I am bored by hearing the same 'American' point of view on every world event. It gets tedious and far too one-sided. My foreign professors have caused me to look at world events in a different light. I have, in effect, formed new opinions on events that I previously thought differently of. This reminds me that it is important to be open-minded and not just believe the first thing you hear. It's important to listen to both sides before making an educated decision.

Some students also felt that it was important to get a different perspective on US involvement in world events and on biases in the US media representations of these events, as expressed in the following quotation:

The logo consists of the word "SYMPOSIUM" in a bold, sans-serif font, enclosed within a thick, black, horizontally-oriented oval border.

I really feel it is a wonderful experience and great opportunity to be taught by a foreign professor. I, for one, am tired of hearing that the United States does everything correctly, because I believe that our impact on other countries may not be as positive as the media presents it to be. A foreign professor can give a reality check that the US is not always wanted or needed in other countries.

Three students actually expressed the idea that it was not only beneficial to them to be exposed to a different point of view, but that it may be easier for a non-American to provide this perspective because they have grown up in a completely different setting and can therefore compare different interpretations they have been exposed to. In this way, they may be more broad-minded than people who have always lived in the same country:

American politics has a history of being questionable. It is my belief that it would be easier for a foreign professor to teach on subjects that they had no part in whatsoever, having grown up in a different part of the world. It may be easier for foreign professors to step back and look at the whole picture and give an unbiased approach to presenting the material.

While most students stated that they appreciated the different perspective that foreign-born professors provide, a few felt uncomfortable with a non-American criticizing their home country (4 per cent). Students' comments ranged from expressing slight disagreement ("Sometimes foreign professors come off a little harsh on the United States") to harsh criticism of the professors' interpretations: "Our professor seems to be pretty un-American. Whenever we talk about conflicts, the US somehow ends up being blamed for them" or "Foreigners have no right to criticize our country". Some students realized that it was a fine line for professors to walk to criticize the US without seeming ungrateful. But, as one student said, "Although it may be uncomfortable for foreign professors to talk negatively about the United States, I think it is important for Americans to hear negatives as well as positives from an outsider". Ten of the 12 professors interviewed mentioned that they felt uneasy about criticizing the United States or reported that students resented them for doing so. A European instructor reported that "students can be very confrontational towards foreigners". An Asian professor said, "Students can be very hostile to foreigners for saying anything even remotely critical of the US". She found this particularly frustrating as American-born professors making the same comments are often seen as progressive. Due to these student reactions, many felt torn between what they felt was their duty—namely to present students with a different perspective or to expose problematic decisions or actions by the United States—and shying away from it because of how students felt about it. To avoid confrontations with students, several foreign-born professors try to present their material in strictly neutral terms, or even stay away from potentially problematic topics completely. For example, three foreign-born professors mentioned that they leave out North America in World Regional Geography classes so that they do not have to criticize the United States or say anything that may upset their students. For others, however, bringing up controversies is essential to giving students an education. A European professor, for example, commented, "Many foreign instructors are more political than US instructors" because forming independent opinion was stressed in their own university education. She, like many others, believed that students have to deal with different opinions and have to learn to distinguish between opinion and fact, no matter who



**Table 5.** Recommendations for foreign-born professors: opinions

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- Do not shy away from political issues or confrontational topics just because some students give you a hard time. Remember that many others will often silently agree with you but do not speak up. It is important that students learn to listen to different points of view and form their own opinions
  - Where possible, include your criticisms of the US within a broader discussion of the negative roles played by a variety of countries. Students are more receptive to criticism about the US when they do not feel that you single out their home country
  - Tell students early on in the class that diversity in opinion is positive and that they should always listen to different points of view before forming their own opinion. (Remember that students may not have been trained in school to form their own opinions and weigh different arguments)
- 

exposes them to these different points of view. European professors, in particular, expressed frustration with how little students are willing to discuss or form an independent opinion. As one European professor put it:

It is quite difficult here to motivate students to discuss even when the topics are of general interest. In the United States you have to say something absolutely outrageous before you get any reaction from the students. People here are very uncritical, so we, the professors, actually have to tell the students not to believe everything we tell them.

As this section shows, a professor's 'foreignness' can be an important resource in teaching, especially in a discipline such as geography. The vast majority of the students enjoy hearing about first-hand experiences and appreciate different points of view, as long as they do not get the feeling that the professors have little respect for the 'American' point of view. In practice this means that, as some students put it, foreign-born professors have to walk a fine line between teaching about their home countries and other perspectives without preaching (Table 5).

### **Conclusion**

The attitudes of students towards international instructors vary widely. One student expressed his dislike by writing "Hire Americans!" on a professor's course evaluation. Others believe that foreign-born professors provide them with more than the regular classroom education by exposing them to different points of view, helping them to overcome stereotypes, and giving them first-hand insights into other places and people. In my sample, the number of students who felt seriously disadvantaged by having foreign-born professors was small, suggesting that the 'problem of foreign professors' is exaggerated in the public debate. Most students thought that the 'foreignness' of a professor had both disadvantages and advantages, and believed that many of the disadvantages can be overcome if both sides make an effort.

Overcoming language issues requires the cooperation of both students and professors, and is important as student attitudes towards a foreign-born professor are often strongly influenced by language issues, particularly accent. Students should be told during their orientation sessions that it is expected of them to make an effort in adjusting to foreign



accents, while foreign-born instructors should acknowledge in class that their accent may be difficult for the students and find ways to help their students understand them.

Even though institutions and professors should work together to teach students to be more flexible and accepting, and point out the long-term benefits of such an attitude, in reality foreign-born professors have to make most of the adjustments since they are teaching in the US system. Providing international instructors with information about the US education system and giving them access to mentors who can answer their questions is a key step towards easing that transition. A wider network of international instructors may also provide a good forum for exchanging ideas and getting support.

Finally, international professors should capitalize on their 'foreignness' whenever possible. Most students appreciate a more 'authentic' approach to teaching and love to hear first-hand experiences from other parts of the world. Foreign-born geographers, in particular, have a perfect opportunity to insert examples from their home countries or provide different perspectives on issues.

In addition to the issues addressed in this paper, other issues warrant careful investigation. Most significantly, it is important to investigate the role of gender and race in addition to 'foreignness' in determining international instructors' experiences in the classroom (Lim & Herrera-Sobek, 2000; Turner & Myers, 2000; Moody, 2004). Another important future direction of research is to compare students' attitudes towards foreign-born instructors in other types of educational institutions (small private liberal arts colleges vs. large public universities), different parts of the country, and universities with large numbers of international scholars versus those that are fairly homogeneous in their ethnic and racial makeup.

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