Chapter 4
Navigating Academia Away From Home:
Exploring the Challenges of African–Born Academics

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ABSTRACT

This study examined different adjustment challenges experienced by African-born faculty members in higher education in the United States. Using the critical race theory as a framework and in-depth interviews of a purposive sample of nine African-born academics selected from across the U.S., the authors explored the factors that militate against the smooth transition of these diaspora faculties in higher education in the country and offer insights into a better understanding of their needs and experiences. The findings show that African-born academics in U.S. higher education face challenges in communication, differences in academic systems, and culture, especially in the power distance between students and instructors. The authors offer recommendations for aspiring diaspora and African-born faculties and the policymakers in U.S. universities and colleges that hire these professionals.

INTRODUCTION

There is a dearth of literature on the cultural challenges and issues of communication that foreign-born or international educators face in academia overseas. The few studies that capture these challenges in foreign institutions of higher learning, do not take an in-depth approach that focuses on the educators themselves in order to capture their social experiences (see Menges, 1999). Foreign-born educators often struggle to overcome a number of challenges that range from cultural disparities to building interpersonal relationships necessary to fulfil the requirements of research, service and teaching in their institutions of learning abroad. This difficulty may be greater for educators who take up positions in institutions where they are unfamiliar with the academic culture and norms. Thus, their struggles may be twofold: first, in being themselves and secondly, fitting into their new academic space.

Institutions of higher education in the United States (U.S.) generally seek to recruit and retain talents from overseas. However, the new recruits often do not experience smooth transitions in their new workplaces. One glaring area where these diasporic educators face transitional problems is in their interpersonal communication within the academic workplace. Thus, despite their academic accomplishments, some foreign-born academics experience obstacles that may hinder their timely integration, growth and overall success in academia.

A few studies indicate that foreign-born faculties in U.S. higher institutions of learning face unusual challenges in their workplace. In fact, Alberts (2008) who studied the adjustment of foreign-born faculty members, found the challenge of understanding the U.S. grading systems and academic standards. Some are Fpaid lower salaries than their U.S. colleagues, irrespective of possessing the same qualifications and experience (Corley & Sabharwal, 2007). Furthermore, they are faced with difficult relationship building experiences with students (Collins, 2008). In their personal lives, some of them feel a sense of loneliness being far from their families and may struggle with settling into their new environment (Gahungu, 2011). In spite of these documented difficulties, foreign faculty members contribute to the educational growth of their adopted country. Levin (2008) posits that a good number of the Nobel Prize winners are foreign-born U.S. citizens.

Some extraneous issues may pose unforeseen challenges for foreign-born faculty members. For instance, when they are meritoriously promoted, some of their American-born colleagues with whom they competed for that position, tend to feel they do not deserve that promotion. As Wilson (2001) suggests, although the hiring and promotion of foreign-born faculty professors are based on merit, their ability to fit into their new roles and build relationships may not go as smoothly as they might wish.

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