

Point/Counterpoint

Can Foreign-Born Faculty Excel in American Universities?

Carter's Point

In the "What George Carter Thinks" series here at usmnews.net, EFIB Chair George Carter stated that there are not many people in academe who excel in all three of the basic areas – teaching, research, and service. He then goes on to add, "... and as we get more foreign people into it [American academe] that proportion [i.e., faculty in American universities who excel in all three areas to the total faculty population of American universities] keeps going down and down and down." So, from Carter's perspective, the influx of foreign-born individuals into American universities is diluting the proportion of *exceptional* scholars.

One would think that Carter's point is based on the belief that foreign-born individuals are not usually as good in the classroom as individuals who are born in the U.S. The next likely candidate for an American advantage would have to be in service, given that it, along with teaching, involves a relatively large degree of oral communication. Research, on the other hand, likely offers foreign-born individuals an opportunity to play to their strengths (e.g., science and mathematical communication, which is a universal "language"), and avoid their weaknesses (e.g., oral/verbal communication). So, from what we can glean from Carter's quote about foreign-born faculty, it seems as though he believes that foreign-born faculty may likely struggle to meet the classroom instruction and service standards of their American counterparts. As such, the likelihood of encountering a foreign-born faculty who excels in the three academic areas of teaching, research, and service will fall short of that for the typical American academician.

Marvasti's Counterpoint

Unlike Carter, Akbar Marvasti has contributed to the literature on the relative performance of foreign-born faculty in U.S. academia. In an 18-Apr-05 interview with Stacy Teicher of *The Christian Science Monitor*, Marvasti stated that about 25 percent of the faculty at American universities are foreign-born, a fact that should be "seen as an asset." Though Marvasti concedes that "[c]ommunication skills are important, there's no question about it," he also suggests that we should also acknowledge the contributions of foreign-born faculty, especially in the areas of science and math. Thus, Marvasti's comments to Teicher seem to support our supposition that Carter believes that teaching and service constitute the areas where foreign-born faculty fall short of individuals born in the U.S. Marvasti adds another element to the mix by saying that the increasingly diverse student body (in American universities) would benefit from international role models.

In an article in press with *The American Economist*, Marvasti presents statistical evidence demonstrating that any adverse effect on American students that is found by having a foreign-born T.A. is due to something other than the lack of language proficiency of the foreign-born T.A. Thus, Marvasti's view and applied research conflict and contradict the views held by Carter. Not only does Marvasti's work fail to indicate any significant disadvantage facing foreign-born faculty in terms of teaching skills vis-à-vis their American counterparts, Marvasti extends the comparison by including social benefits (to students) that come from having foreign-born instructors in American classrooms.
