



Full Length Research Paper

Addressing Diversity Deficiency on U.S. Rural University Campuses

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Abstract

In order to prepare high quality PK-12 teachers who can lead in the increasingly diverse school, higher institutions put more emphasis on infusing diversity in curriculum and creating diverse culture for pre-service teachers. Faculty members from culturally, linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds help diversify campus culture and broaden college students' understanding of diversity. Challenges exist not only in attracting CLD faculty to apply for jobs in academia, but also in retaining the CLD faculty members hired in U.S. geographically rural universities. In the current study, three CLD faculty members teaching at rural universities were interviewed of their teaching experiences. All of the three participants admitted the disconnection between their educational background and U.S. education system poses challenges to them. They stressed support system should be set up to help CLD faculty adjust to the U.S. higher education culture.

Keywords: CLD faculty retention, professional development, diversity, reflective practices, faculty support

INTRODUCTION

With an increased number of children from culturally linguistically diverse (CLD) family backgrounds enrolled in PK-12 schools in the U.S., it becomes a pressing issue that our PK-12 teachers be well trained to accommodate the CLD children in daily routine settings. Teacher training institutions are expected to prepare pre-service teachers to work in diverse settings and teach students from diverse backgrounds (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE); Smolen, Colville-Hall, Liang, & Donald, 2006). There are multiple ways that pre-service teachers can obtain diverse experiences such as field experience, practicum, student teaching and intern in diverse settings as well as international experiences. However, for pre-service teaching training programs in rural communities, this might not be possible. For these pre-service teacher training programs recruiting faculty from CLD backgrounds probably is a realistic way to address this issue. Park and Denson's (2009) study stresses the importance of recruiting and retaining CLD faculty, and how CLD faculty brings diversity and serves as advocate for diversity on higher institution campuses. Similarly, Warren, Pacino, Foy, and Bond's (2011) study indicates that recruitment, retention and support efforts are needed

to increase the diversity of high education institutions. Faculty with CLD backgrounds "enhance educational quality and outcomes for all students" (Shinnar & Williams, 2008, p. 43). CLD faculty is likely to advocate for diversity on higher institution campuses and increase student cultural awareness (Park & Denson, 2009; Shinnar & Williams, 2008). Recruiting CLD faculty is certainly a good way to increase diversity of rural U.S. universities where students lack opportunities to interact with peers and professionals from diverse backgrounds. In the U.S. more than 500 higher education institutions have initiated plans to recruit and retain diverse faculty candidates (Fleetwood & Aebersold, 2010).

However, recruiting CLD faculty is not an easy job and CLD faculty retention is even more challenging (Shinnar & Williams, 2008). Research (Bilimoria & Buch, 2010) recommends that search committee members and administrators be trained to conduct effective, inclusive searches, thus avoiding bias towards candidates from diverse backgrounds and improving diversity views. Challenges occur during the process of recruiting CLD faculty such as small labor pool of CLD Ph.D. graduates and lack of administrative support (Shinnar & Williams, 2008). Factors associated with retention issues include

lack of diverse ethnic community in rural areas, inadequate support provided to these faculty members, and discrimination, bias or “hostile institutional and faculty/staff culture” (Kayes, 2006, p. 65). For example, college students who were raised in rural areas have no previous experience of taking classes with CLD faculty. Students may complain about CLD faculty’s accent or different teaching style, which in turn affects the CLD faculty evaluation. CLD faculty member tends to receive “lower student evaluations” and be “perceived lack academic rigor and overlooked for promotion (Warren, Pacino, Foy, & Bond, 2011, p. 37). Given the diversity issues and challenges in recruitment and retention of CLD faculty mentioned above, the current study aims to explore the challenges the CLD faculty experienced at U.S. rural universities and what support system should be developed to increase retention rate for the CLD faculty members.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Participants and Settings

The participants in the study are three CLD faculty members in pre-service teacher training programs at U.S. rural universities. All of the three participants, Sophia, Dave and Dali (all pseudonym names for confidentiality purpose), are tenure-track faculty, among whom one is tenured faculty and the other two have yet to apply for tenure. Two of them taught at private institution for five years and another in public institution for seven years. Sophia teaches behavior intervention and statistics courses for education majors, Dave teaches instructional technology and related courses, and Dali methods courses. All three interviews took place over the phone. The interview lasted for approximately an hour. There are four interview questions as below:

1. Please share your teaching experiences at your university.
2. What are some challenges that you face while teaching at the university?
3. What kind of support have you received while teaching at the university? Is there any other support that you expect to receive? Please explain.
4. What are factors that cause the faculty from culturally, linguistically diverse backgrounds quit teaching from a U.S. rural university?

In addition, interviewees were offered opportunities to share additional comments related to the topic.

Research questions

What are the challenges that faculty from CLD backgrounds experienced at U.S. rural universities?

What support system should be developed to retain CLD faculty at U.S. rural universities?

RESULTS

Notes were taken during the interview and transcribed immediately afterwards. Within a week after all of the three interviews were completed, the researcher coded the collected data and summarized three common themes. The major themes identified include the diverse community, CLD faculty contribution to diversity, and faculty support.

Diverse Community

All of the three participants mentioned increased diversity on university campus was observed in recent years such as increased student and faculty population from CLD backgrounds. Sophia, one of the participants, mentioned that compared to seven years ago there are more students from different states and international students enrolled at the university she teaches. Student population diversity helps improve diversity awareness. Through interaction with diverse peers, Caucasian students develop understanding of different cultures and perspectives and respect for cultural, linguistic, racial and sexual differences.

Although the number of CLD faculty in higher education also increases, it does not increase as much and quickly as the student population. At the university where Sophia is teaching approximately 2% of the faculty members are from CLD backgrounds. There is not much communication among the international faculty. Although there used to be an international faculty organization years ago before Sophia took this job this organization dissolved due to lack of support, leadership, and diversity awareness. On the contrary, another participant Dali mentioned the university where he teaches at started a faculty organization the same year he took the position there. This faculty organization works to support new faculty as well as international faculty to develop collaboration between each other.

There is a lack of diversity and international community in the local community where the three participants live. Fortunately within two- to four- hour drive they can shop at international grocery stores, join in international community activities, and attend church services in native language. Dali interpreted this as a bonus of teaching at rural universities. He said “I really appreciate that we live close (within three hour drive) to our native Community but not that close so that my children are also immersed in American culture.” On the contrary, Sophia interpreted living three-hour away from international community a barrier to connect to her native

culture. She felt tired of driving three hours one way to shop at oriental grocery stores.

CLD Faculty Contribution to Diversity

CLD faculty help diversify the local community where they teach. Sophia invited international faculty and researchers from other universities to deliver presentation on positive behavior support, functional behavior analysis and overrepresentation of students of color in special education. She presented at local meetings and conferences about social, emotional and behavioral challenges student of CLD backgrounds experienced. She also volunteered as faculty advisor for college students from CLD backgrounds and international students. In class, she introduced policies and best practices for students with emotional behavior challenges adopted by her home country and other countries. This broadens pre-service teachers' horizon of emotional behavioral disturbances across cultures.

Dave and Dali were also actively involved in the campus and local community services. In addition to tutoring CLD students, Dave served as faculty advisor of an international student organization on campus. Bringing speakers from different cultures to campus discussing computer science research and innovations, Dave helped expand students' vision of science and technology. He also arranged a summer camp for young children in the local community where basic math and science facts were taught and children were involved in hands on experiments. This triggers children interest in science, math and technology from a young age. Dali served as coordinator of international cooperation programs at his university. He helped collaborative research and student field experience placement and practicum with foreign universities.

Faculty Support

All of the three participants shared that there are new faculty orientations at the institution where they teach. Dali especially mentioned that at the new faculty orientation before the first semester, he received very useful information about contract, faculty evaluation, and community support. During the first semester, he also attended college wide and an international faculty orientation. In addition, there are regular bi-monthly meetings arranged by his dean for new faculty to ask questions and share information and concerns. In addition, at the bi-monthly meetings, some senior faculty members from different programs were invited to share teaching experiences. As a new faculty Dali also received special funding to attend conferences and grant writing seminars. Some senior faculty members even invited him to observe them at teaching. He also shadowed senior

faculty at committee work. At the end of first year, he received above average teaching evaluation. Although he received a less favorable letter from provost who pointed out several weak areas that need improvement, his department chairperson and senior faculty members reassured him that almost everybody struggled in these areas during the first year of teaching and he can definitely improve in these areas next year. His student evaluation and other weak areas were improved the next year and he continued to make improvement the following year.

Dave didn't receive that much support as Dali. When he came up with some questions about student issues, teaching evaluations and committee work, he didn't feel comfortable requesting assistance from colleagues but seeking guidance from a friend who taught at another university. He felt he received limited support as new faculty. His first year evaluation was below average among his colleagues although he achieved a lot in research. Sophia shared some similar experiences during her first two years of teaching. She felt isolated some time as she didn't feel she received as much support on campus. Sophia's first year student evaluations were really a shock to her. Despite she tried her best to deliver knowledge and share her personal experience with the students, she was ranked pretty low; lower than the faculty average in her college. When reflected on her teaching and student evaluation result, Sophia interpreted this mainly derived from her lack of understanding of student math level and the content she presented in the *Introduction to Statistics* was too challenging to freshmen who took her class. Sophia reflected,

I do not really understand the college freshmen's math level. According to my personal education background in my home country, students should be able to master these mathematic concepts once graduated from the high school. But it is not the case among the students I taught.

The disconnection between CLD faculty educational background and U.S. education system possibly lead to the difficulty adjusting in the teaching position among all of the three participants. Sophia admitted that she received some advice from her mentor, but more importantly she obtained a lot of emotional support and suggestions from a senior faculty that she acquainted through scholarly conferences who teaches at another university.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The current study indicates that CLD faculty help reduce the diversity deficiency experienced by some U.S. universities in rural communities. Pre-service teachers

benefit from having CLD faculty in higher institutions because CLD faculty's diverse experiences help pre-service teachers develop a deeper understanding of other cultures and be well prepared to teach in diverse settings. Recruitment and retention of CLD faculty is an imperative task for U.S. higher institutions especially those located in geographically rural areas where college students have less exposure to diversity. Challenges that CLD faculty encounters include lack of professional support and understanding and acceptance of diversity. In order to address these issues, U.S. higher institutions should create a culturally friendly climate on campus and promote college students and faculty to develop positive attitudes towards diversity through trainings such as diversity workshop and clinical experiences.

Establishing support system can help with CLD faculty retention. In Dali's case, he really benefitted from the mentor system, where he received guidance and developed personal connections quickly though some time he was also treated without respect due to his cultural differences and accent. Dali shared "there was one time I went to borrow some electronic devices for classroom use. The staff member at the technology department complained about having hard time understanding me due to my thick accent." That made Dali feel hurt but the support he received and the appreciation of the diversity at the university where he worked outweigh the unpleasant incidents that happened to him occasionally.

Dave also praised some of the support he received as new faculty. For example, as a new faculty Dave did not advise students during the first year of teaching; later when he started advising, his mentor and department chairperson provided a lot of assistance. Both Sophia and Dave pointed out that new faculty members in their institutions were provided with many research opportunities and funding to support their research. Sophia mentioned in her institution untenured junior faculty received highest percentage of professional development fund. Similarly, Dave shared that in his institution untenured faculty members can apply for sabbatical leave during the fourth year of teaching, which allows them to focus on research before applying for tenure and promotion.

University administrators can take actions to provide more support by adjusting evaluation criteria, and having teaching, research and service carry equal weight in faculty evaluation; combine peer chair and student evaluation and use the composite score to evaluate faculty teaching; increase college students' and especially the pre-service teachers' exposure to diverse cultures through attending campus diversity activities, and field trip to and student teaching and having practicum in inner city schools, thus improving their understanding and acceptance of cultural differences.

Rural universities should provide CLD faculty more support. At new faculty orientation, schedule some small

meetings for new CLD faculty where they can share information about faculty development and local cultural groups. Initiate mentor system and if possible, assign senior CLD faculty as mentor for the new CLD faculty; and start a diversity committees where senior CLD faculty can take lead to discuss and organize multicultural events. Similarly, Hill, Shaw, Taylor and Hallar (2011) suggested arranging workshop on diversity and encouraging administrative staff to attend those workshops to increase diversity on campus.

To summarize, CLD faculty members bring diverse cultural perspectives to higher institution campuses, embed multicultural knowledge and pedagogy into teaching, and serve as diversity advocate. This way, our pre-service teachers in the future education field are more willing to establish collaborative relationship with colleagues, students and families from CLD backgrounds. They are more willing to implement differentiated instruction to address our CLD students' unique learning as well as social emotional needs in and out of classrooms. This in turn increases the pre-service teachers' marketability and better prepares them in the increasingly diverse world.

Limitations

This is a relatively small scale study with only three CLD faculty interviewed and all of the participants teach at rural universities located in northeastern regions of the U.S. The results provide audience a window to understand CLD faculty experiences at U.S. rural universities, support they received and challenges they faced. However, it may not be generalizable to represent experiences of CLD faculty who teach at universities located in metropolitan areas or those with more cultural diversity.

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