International Faculty at Western – An Untapped Resource

We often hear the terms *globalization* and *internationalization* used interchangeably, but in fact they refer to two different phenomena. As defined by a perennial scholar on the topic, globalization is the "the flow of technology, economy, knowledge, people, values, and ideas ... across borders" while internationalization involves "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education." To frame this distinction more plainly, globalization is the inevitable context that WCU students face upon graduation; internationalization is the urgent work we must undertake to prepare them for this context.

Western has already made strides in this direction. International student enrollment is up by nearly 50 percent, a record number of students are studying abroad, and students now have the option of graduating with a dual degree from Western and an overseas institution in a number of disciplines. Meanwhile, the Department of Modern Foreign Language continues to expand its offering of courses. Enrollment in Japanese has grown to 200 students in just five years, and new courses in Mandarin Chinese appear to be attracting strong numbers as well. Perhaps most notably, the Provost’s recent establishment of an endowed fund for studying abroad makes it clear that our leadership is giving more than just lip service to the notion of international education.

But as we move forward, we must not overlook a tremendous resource in our own backyard—the growing community of international faculty who call Western their home. By recent estimate, WCU has between 30-40 international faculty members representing at least a dozen different countries and cultural backgrounds. Some are naturalized citizens, others are permanent residents, and a few are here on short-term stay. All of them bring a wealth of ideas, knowledge, and values that have the potential to transform the old paradigms through which our students view the world. Although the experience of studying abroad cannot be replaced, positive interactions with an international professor can stir a spark of discovery leading toward this end. And although popular books like Friedman’s *The World is Flat* may get people talking about globalization, there’s nothing like hearing the first hand life experiences of a world scholar to bring home the point that our education system is asleep at the wheel.

Unfortunately, undergraduates tend to be far too nearsighted to recognize the value of an international scholar in their midst. For example, students complain about not understanding a “foreign accent” and fail to recognize the value of building cross-cultural communication skills. Rather than viewing international instructors as gateways to new ideas and ways of thinking, they see only hurdles in the way of a quick grade. Even worse, a class will all too often display higher incidents of rude and inappropriate behavior when they perceive that their professor is a relative newcomer to the US college scene. Imagine
for a moment having to deal with this amid all the other pressures of teaching on a new campus! While obviously not a silver bullet, freshmen orientation is one place we should start in our attempt to reverse this provincial mindset.

But the responsibility does not lie only with undergraduates. All of us need to find ways to help our international colleagues see that they are more than a statistic of diversity in a region where the term is usually associated with mollusks, mushrooms, and millipedes. Last August, the Faculty Center took an important step in this direction by establishing the International Faculty Learning Community (IFLC). Already 20 members strong and still growing, this group of international and non-international faculty members is working together to make Western a more attractive and rewarding place for those from diverse cultural backgrounds. On top of a long to-do list is the development of a website and virtual resource center through which incoming international faculty can obtain crucial information and make connections with other international faculty members across the university. Plans are also being made to integrate these resources into future new faculty orientation events. If you would like to join the IFLC or be part of the listserv that is dedicated to international faculty issues, you can contact me at blake@wcu.edu.

Even if you don’t have room in your schedule for another monthly commitment, you can join the efforts of the IFLC by looking for ways to integrate the knowledge and ideas of international faculty in your college or department. Need some quick starters? Try learning how various education rituals such as the TPR process are conducted in their home countries. Can our existing models be adapted and improved in some way? Pry into their minds to see how issues such as student recruitment and retention are addressed (or not addressed) abroad. See if you can gain insight into why the math scores of elementary students in many other countries are several grade levels beyond those of our own children. Learn more about the steps they took to become bilingual speakers. Are there alternative ways to encourage bilingual preparedness among our own students? While the responses to these and other questions may not seem immediately straightforward, careful dialogues may yield information that has enormous potential for transforming the way we do business—both here at Western and in the local context we serve.

We must remind ourselves that internationalization is more than mission statements, programs, and initiatives; it involves personal effort at the grass roots level to ensure that all individuals are acknowledged for what they bring to the global (and regional) table. Thank you international faculty for your tremendous contribution to this university—and Happy Chinese New Year to our East Asian colleagues!

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