

# Surviving as Foreign-Born Immigrants in America's Higher Education: Eight Exemplary Cases

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In every democratically heterogeneous society like America, different players are involved in contributing to the smooth running of its higher education. These players have differentiated body of knowledge with which to make America's higher education a premier one. However, that does not seem to be the case for many foreign-born African immigrants. These immigrants confront racism, xenophobia and other forms of mistreatments. In this article, the authors use six exemplary cases to discuss their plights and what can be done to maximize their fullest potential in America's higher education.

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I want my children to understand the world, but not just because the world is fascinating and the human mind is curious. I want them to understand it, so that they will be positioned to make it a better place. Knowledge is not the same as morality, but we need to understand, if we are to avoid past mistakes and move in productive directions. An important part of that understanding knows who we are and what we can do... Ultimately, we must synthesize our understandings for ourselves. The performance of understanding that matters are the ones we carry out as human beings in an imperfect world which we can affect for good or for ill. (Gardner, 1994, pp. 180-181)

As it appears, Gardner's (1994) dream has become a nightmare for many foreign-born African immigrants in the USA. These immigrants have continued to search for equity in the USA, a land of opportunity and a Canaan land that is supposed to house people from different racial, cultural, linguistic, religious and ethnic groups. In addition, these groups are supposed to have a sense of belonging in spite of their race, culture, learning style, behavioral pattern, personal idiosyncrasy and national origin (Obiakor, 2007). These ideals are exiting, especially for new immigrants. However, for many African immigrants in America's higher education, their dreams appear to be unfulfilled. In this article, we present pertinent cases and discuss ways to remediate their problems and maximize their potential.

## Exposing the Problems

There are myriad of cases that the highlight problems and predicaments of many foreign-born African immigrants in America's higher education. For purposes of this article, the author presents eight unique exemplary cases.

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### **The Case of Nnenna**

Nnenna left Nigeria for America in search of a golden fleece. Her initial program of study was law and she was eager to complete this program and go back to her country. Upon arrival, she met with her white college advisor, a supposed multi-culturalist, advised her to go for a different program because of her “accent”. Her refusal to adhere to such ill advice led to her first racial academic encounter in the USA. She felt that she was perceived and categorized negatively, because of her linguistic difference which has nothing to do with her intellectual capability. Further, categorizing her with labels and allowing her succumb to such undesirable labels created negative opportunities for exclusion, degradation and subsequent failure in her goal.

### **The Case of Umarudiko**

Umarudiko came to the USA from Morocco. He has a dark skin tone and speaks with an accent. He was employed as a bilingual educator in his department and university. His chairperson, Dr. Lambeth, saw himself as a multicultural person. However, Umarudiko's name and style of dressing put him in a precarious position as a radical Moslem and a terrorist. Further, his linguistic difference was also seen and labeled as a deficiency in carrying on an effective instruction in his university. Umarudiko's first year at this institution was very stressful, because of students' behaviors and absence of cooperation, collaboration and consultation with his colleagues who also perceived him negatively. Despite of name calling and other disrespectful behaviors that were exhibited by these students, Umarudiko continued to help them as much as he could. Some of his students' parents began complaining of his radical dressing and accent. They voiced concerns that such radical dressing and heavy accent impaired their children's ability to learn. These parents collaboratively reported Umarudiko to the chair of the department and demanded that their children be reassigned to another instructor. The chair person, who called himself a multicultural person and should have protected Umarudiko, succumbed to the parents' request. Umarudiko finally ended his first year at this institution with lots of stress, lack of support from the chairperson, negative perceptions from some of the colleagues, name calling and disrespectful behaviors from students. The above negative encounters led Umarudiko to resign and seek another teaching position.

### **The Case of Moses**

Moses was a doctoral student in one of America's higher institutions. He came from Botswana to get his doctoral degree. He enjoyed learning; however, in the process of getting his degree, he experienced misperception, mislabeling and discrimination. He landed a job in one of the elite colleges. He described his survival experience as this,

Initially, rapport with the faculty and students was great, but as time went on, the good atmosphere began to change. This college, with about 99.9% white students, began to expect more than I could offer. Most of my students expected me to give them A grades without working for it. I did not yield to such demand. Instead, I maintained my policy of equal merit meaning that students must merit it through academic work in order to be given good grades. Those students, who could not meet my academic demands, called me names and at the same time showed disrespect. They eventually went to the Chair and reported me for being biased against Whites—they alleged that they could not understand my accent and that had contributed to their poor academic performance.

Since the college mostly got its funding from the students' school fees, fear of losing students gripped the college. Thus, several colleagues, including Moses' Chair person, approached him with a threat that “either you give the students what they ask for or the college would fire you”. To avoid being fired for some thing he knew

to be against educational ethics, he wisely submitted his resignation letter and left to become a cab driver.

### **The Case of Barack**

Barack was from Kenya, East Africa. Before leaving his country for the USA, he was a teacher educator in one of Kenya's institutions of higher education. Upon arrival to the USA, he landed a good paying job and he was very excited. Faculty members in his department were very accepting, appreciating and accommodating of his pedagogical approach in instructional delivery. He began thinking that this college teaching job was going to last. But, what he did not know was that the job he got at that moment coincided with the NCATE (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education) visit. This means that this institution needed a minority person to fulfill the diversity requirement. After the NCATE visit, it did not take long before Barack began to notice that he was not accepted in the environment, because of his accent, teaching styles and his divergent world views about education. Considering the fact that when he moved into faculty housing, it was not cleaned, yet houses of white faculty were cleaned. When he complained, one of the staff noted that, "This is the way we do things; you can leave if you do not like it. You foreigners do not understand". On several occasions, the legitimacy of Barack's skin color was doubted. As time went on, he felt unrecognized in most of his departmental meetings, because of his world views.

### **The Case of Ferguson**

Ferguson was born in Jamaica. He was a senior lecturer in one of the prestigious universities in Jamaica. He came to America hoping to make both ends meet economically. On arrival, he landed a good teaching job in one of the state colleges. According to Ferguson,

I applied and was called immediately. I inquired on how to prepare for the interview. I was told not to worry, but to buy my flight ticket and come for a brief interview immediately. I was excited about this great opportunity.

When he got there, he found that the Dean of the School of Education and all teacher preparation faculty and staff members were whites. There was no faculty of color. Ferguson was not bothered much, because he was promised support and everything he wanted, and it was an opportunity for him to grow as a teacher educator.

Soon after the NCATE visit, the strangest behavior from the Dean of the School of Education and the other white faculty surfaced. First, he was most of the time ignored when he motioned to speak in the faculty meeting where he thought he was a part of the team. Next, students began to complain about his accent and lack of knowledge of the course he was teaching. They finally reported him to the Chair of the Department, who unannounced, came to his classroom to humiliate him publically. The Chair stated,

Ferguson, look, I have been hearing about your ineffectiveness in teaching this course, and further, your accent add to the students' confusion. I believe what the students are telling about you, and you must have to change if you want to last longer here.

You students, do not worry we will take care of you and make sure that you are happy wether with or without Ferguson.

Ferguson began to feel bothered, deficient and confused about his future. He has left his job in Jamaica to America for a better paying one, and now did not know what his future holds. The lack of clear thought about his next action left him confused and restless. He could not think rationally. He began to have sleepless night and feeling of less intelligence occupied his mind. His faculty members, who should have collaborated and

worked with him in a professional manner, began to talk about him as an antisocial and isolated him. Ferguson began to see life in America different from the one he came from.

A week later, Ferguson was served with a sack letter, and immediately replaced with another white professor. He now realized that the reason for being hired and was promised different kinds of support and everything he wanted was to use him to satisfy the institution's diversity requirement, and thereafter, he would be fired. His attempt to fight his sudden sack was fruitless. Now, he has learned his lesson and has left the institution in agony.

### **The Case of Ela**

Ela came from Mexico to USA as a doctoral student. She had planned to return home and start a school. She loved her home, because her home represented where she grew up. Upon getting to the USA, she realized that she was the only person of color and out of ignorance, many Americans did not have a positive image about her country. One of her racial encounters was language. Her professor would criticize her accent, made fun of, and even asked her to pronounce some words several times in front of her fellow classmates. She also had to repeat things several times over before she could be understood. The public ignominy and humiliation she got from both her American professor and class mates made her become a silent listener more often than not. She did not want to have to deal with having to restate things several times, nor did she desire to call attention to herself by opening her mouth. Worst of this humiliation was the sudden expulsion from this mostly white predominant institution, simply because Ella could no longer continue to embrace such negativity from these racist professors who claimed to her status in this country. That limitation of her freedom was a hindrance of her entry visas, work permits, illegal immigrant, alien status, passports and other authorizing documents that served to remind her about certain behavioral expectations she must abide by (Gutmann, 2003). Being a stereotypical odd in higher education, Ella left this strong and determined person, who wanted to defy racist to another more understanding and welcoming institution to complete her doctoral degree.

### **The Case of Lee**

Lee came from China to teach special education in one of the America's higher institutions in America. He did not know that this institution had failed the NCATE, because of faculty diversity. In the institutional report, the NCATE suggested for faculty diversity. It has been the unprofessional behavior of this institution for years not to hire any person of color for fear that the enrollment of this predominantly white institution will fall. At the suggestion of the NCATE, it decided to hire Lee until after the accreditation visit. Lee accepted this position at this institution with pleasure. Being the first son from a family of six, he was ready to help educate his siblings.

Initially, the Chair of the Department of Education and the faculty members were very pleased with his performance in all aspects of special education that some of them became much closed to me. According to Lee,

Things went very well for me in the first year and my students' evaluation of me was excellent. For this and other reasons, I was promoted to an associate professor. In my second year, things changed. I was in my office one late Friday when my department Chair called me into his office and disappointedly told me that some of the students complained that they were having problems understanding my accent.

Hearing this unexpected information, Lee was surprised at the importance some of the white students attached to accents even though some of these students hardly spoke understandable English outside of their community. The Chair, as a result of the students' complaint, recommended that Lee be registered for English as a second language program. Lee became very frustrated and asked the Chair for her reason for such a sudden

demand that he joins the ESL (English as a second language) program in order to improve his enunciation ability to carry his teaching assignments effectively?. Further, Lee asked to know the reason why he was not told during his interview that his “accent” was not good enough to teach effectively to students. The Chair responded that, “We are here to serve the students”. It took a while for Lee to conceptualize the reason why his accent was not an issue when he went through almost three days of interviews. In fact, this experience exposed the discriminatory nature of the politics in teacher education—where students, because they are White, have more power than a faculty. This is an example of how teacher education continues to isolate, separate and discriminate against foreign-born immigrants in America's higher education. The misconception is that these foreign-born immigrants are not as intelligent as their white colleagues, hence, they speak with a “foreign” accent. Knowing that the system always blames the victim, Lee decided to move on with his life. He later found another teaching appointment with a Korean high school.

### **The Case of Mahatma**

Mahatma came to the USA after completing his doctoral studies in special education from India. Upon arrival to the states, he applied for a teaching position in some of the colleges and universities here. Luckily, he landed a job in one of the private colleges that has been in trouble passing the NCATE because of issues relating to diversity. While at this job, he encountered several linguistic and racial discriminations to the point that he was severely humiliated in front of students by the chair of his department. His only savior was Mohammad (Moslem leader), who, according to Mahatma, constantly reminded him that he would neither leave nor for sake him in spite of his present trial and tribulation that he faced. Mahatma's problem began soon after the NCATE visit.

This small college has passed the diversity aspect of their problem, because of the hiring of a diverse faculty. It did not take long for Mahatma to begin to see the handwriting on the wall. The dean of the institution called to inform him that students were not comfortable with his teaching and that he must try to make students comfortable, because he was there because of the students. Students intensified their hatred and continued to complain about Mahatma's poor teaching, at the same time, threatening that if the college did not remove him, they (students) would have no other choice but to go to another college. For fear of losing students, whose the institution heavily depended on financially, decided to make it hard for Mahatma to teach there. He got tired of these frustrations and accepted another teacher's education position at another institution in a predominantly diverse college.

However, he never stops thinking about his experiences as a foreign-born immigrant in America's higher education. According to him,

America is supposed to be a democratic country that seeks for the well-being of its people, but the irony is that it does not do so. Instead, the reverse is seen to be the situation. For example, one's skin color, linguistic and racial differences account for a lot of racial disharmony, antagonism and irrational behaviors. I have victoriously overcome all the militating odds that would have stagnated my goals if I was not determined. I think that the same determination and having faith Allah through his prophet Mohammad would help many foreign-born immigrants in America's higher education overcome the negative perceptions that they constantly face in America.

### **Analyzing the Problems**

The above cases might seem like isolated cases of disgruntled foreign-born immigrants in America's higher education. These individuals continue to see America as a land of opportunities. Yet, they are very

unhappy about their negative experiences in America's higher education. Many foreign born immigrants have come to understand that racism and xenophobia are at the heart of mistreatment (Smith, 2007, p. 17). Surely, they came to the USA in search of a golden fleece, but they feel unwanted because of their accents and the color of their skins. The kind of abhorable condition that many foreign born immigrants find themselves leads one to a simple conclusion: Racism is an endemic problem in America's higher education, just as it is in another American society. As Coleman (1997, p. 9) confirmed,

As much as we try, from under the powerful and permissive umbrella of democracy, to deny it, run from it, not think about it, act cynical about it, and even try to wish it away, there race remains, this "malignancy", this "great Achilles' heel of our nation's future", cornering us, dividing us, and exhausting us; there it remains—visible and invisible, mainly separate and unequal—patiently waiting for "the better angels of our nature", as Lincoln once said, to take permanent root and work towards common ground and common good.

Based on Coleman's insightful comments, one can learn that there are visible balkanizations and tribalizations in America. It is no surprise that foreign-born African immigrants end up with developing different kinds of diseases, including heart attack, stroke, high blood pressure, obesity and other stressful sicknesses (Bambus, 1999, p. 27).

### **Analyzing the Cases**

There appears to be the lack of character and integrity in building strong bridges in teaching, scholarship and service in America's higher education. Clearly, foreign born immigrants will like to run away from "race" and work very hard to reduce its negative impact, but it has continued to matter (Bell, 1985; Coleman, 1997; Mazel, 1998; Obiakor, 2001, 2007; Obiakor & Afolayan, 2007; Obiakor & Beachum, 2005a, 2005b; Obiakor & Grant, 2005; Staples, 1984; West, 1993). The historic presumption that America's school teachers and college professors are liberals and post-modernists is very deceptive and disingenuous. From our perspectives, their behavioral patterns are no different from those of the dominant society. Race has continued to play a devastating role in: student and faculty recruitment and retention; pre-service and in-service trainings; service delivery; testing before and after training; consultation, collaboration and cooperation; funding; community involvement; and government supports.

### **The Implications for Higher Education**

There is no doubt that many foreign-born immigrants feel fortunate to be involved with America's higher education, however, they also feel unwanted and unneeded in it. For example, some of them sometimes see America as a Canaan land that is full of milk, honey and freedom, and blindly see it as a paradise where racial, political, economic and social problems seldom exist. As they get entrenched in the system, they begin to see that America's higher education does not practice what it preaches to the outside world. While it is ideologically and theoretically inviting, it is difficult to survive in it. Skin color continues to be the center of social, economic and political dichotomies. This division has led poor programming and created major impediments to collaborative and consultative activities in America's higher education programs.

Foreign-born immigrants have continued to make the best of the opportunities in America's higher education even as they continue to encounter discriminatory practices. These negative experiences have caused more harm than good in social, political and economic relations between these foreign-born educators and their American counterparts. America is supposed to be a democratic country that seeks for the well-being of its

people and others, but the irony is that it does not do so in its higher institutions of learning. Instead, the reverse is seen to be the situation. For example, one's skin color, linguistic and racial differences continue to account for a lot of divisions that subsequently lead to racial disharmony, antagonism, irrational behavior and low productivity. Sadly, a person's skin color is negatively judged to mean intellectual inferiority and his/her linguistic difference is also misjudged to mean linguistic deficiency. Based on the aforementioned problems, it is important that America's higher education do the following:

- (1) Reform its mission and vision (Freire, 1998; Spilimbergo, 2006; Yang, 2004);
- (2) Advocate for harmonization between foreign-born educators and their American counterparts (Eskay & Adams, 2005);
- (3) Try to be inclusive, not because it is a legal requirement, but because it is the responsible thing to do (Bu, 1997; Davis & Guppy, 1997);
- (4) Redesign its courses to include multicultural education and global education (Obiakor, 2007);
- (5) Stop the revolving door syndrome whereby some institutions use foreign-born African immigrants for accreditation purposes (Freire, 1998);
- (6) Get out of the theory of biological determinism (i.e., that intelligence is only genetically based) (Gardner, 1999; Gutjahr, 1999; King, 1963);
- (7) Collaborate and consult with colleges/universities of other countries (Wood & Gray, 1991; Gollnick & Chinn, 2002);
- (8) Practice what they preach (Gardner, 2004; Grossman, 2002).

### **Conclusions**

Foreign-born immigrants came to the USA' higher education with some air of excitement. But, before long, this excitement turns into regrets due to racism, xenophobia and intolerance. For example, the eight cases that are analyzed in this work present vivid problems confronting foreign-born African immigrants. In spite of these problems, these immigrants have been successful in meandering through the maze of higher education. They are hard workers who bring so much to the table. As a result, they deserve to be respected and included in collaborative and consultative engagements in higher education. They need to be valued as a part of the system. Only when these are done, can the dream of African immigrants be fulfilled?

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