Immigrant Faculty

Immigrant faculty often go unacknowledged as an important dimension of colleges and universities across the U.S.

By Prof. Eunju Lee

When I was growing up in South Korea, my parents emphasized treating my two brothers and me equally. I did not consider their sentiment a big deal until I began to observe how patriarchy permeated every part of the fabric of Korean society. Hundreds of civilians had been killed by the Korean army in the Gwangju Uprising, and the political context of authoritarian rule and even martial law meant that basic freedoms were denied. These experiences had a profound effect on me, and even though I meant marginalizing my college education, I felt compelled to become engaged in activism to support my peers, and to become directly involved in fighting for freedom and democracy in my country.

Now, in retrospect, it is clear that my pursuit of a doctoral degree was directly tied to the political awakening I experienced during those formative years of my life. I entered the sociology program with a mission to educate the next generation of women leaders.

My background and experience have fortified a belief in the intersection of gender, class, and race (ethnicity) and its effects on the disenfranchisement of large segments of the U.S. population and the world.

I first became aware of the effects of poverty on family dynamics through volunteer fieldwork tending children of tenant farmers while I was in college. Programs and policies aimed at socially disadvantaged women and children became my areas of interest. This awareness was heightened and codified during my graduate-school years, and has informed my scholarship and teaching ever since. As I specialized in child-welfare research, policies and programs that support socially and economically disadvantaged families and their children became my special interests.

As an immigrant woman of color, I bring cross-cultural and feminist perspectives to classrooms informed by transformative educational, political, and social experiences in Korea. My background and experiences have fortified a belief in the role of higher education to improve the lives of the oppressed, neglected, and less fortunate. Being a faculty member at the School of Social Welfare allows me to put this belief into action. Students are encouraged to see systems, rather than individuals, as the root cause of social problems, and how they as individuals can become change agents. I feel fortunate and privileged to be at an institution with such a mission.

Eunju Lee is an assistant professor in the School of Social Welfare.
Even after living almost three-quarters of my life in the United States and taking on U.S. citizenship, I still identify much as a Jamaican woman. While I have multiple identities, my ethnic identity is central to how I see myself. And I believe that my life history has given me a critical lens that leads me to foster students’ curiosity. It is the most obvious enactment of the way I, and many of my students, participate in majority and minority communities. While I cannot speak for my students, I believe that our different epistemological systems exist, and that these different systems must simply understand one another’s truth through its own standards and justifications. The roller coaster of life with its sharp twists and turns, highs and lows reminds us all that nothing is static. Nothing is constant. Our identities are fluid and are constantly in flux. We all are undergoing an infinite process of becoming, and it is up to us to pick up the pieces of fragmented and disrupted identities and put them back together to form a new integrated whole.

Bent El Nil, Feminist Ideology and Emancipatory Education

By Prof. Michelle Harris

I make certain to ask them if they hear it and then have them guess where I am from. It is a good icebreaker and a terrific way to introduce myself. But does my foreignness influence, bring value, or enhance the learning experience of my students? Does it present a barrier or is it an advantage?

Though it is difficult to answer these questions in any measurable way, I do believe that I, as a Jamaican professor, bring to my classroom a somewhat different epistemological and ontological bent that while not radically different from “Western” knowledge systems, gain distinction through culture. National cultural knowledge systems, according to cultural theorists, determine things like what constitutes knowledge in a particular place (or nation), who can be a “knower,” what can be known, and how “truth” and the evidence for it can be verified. One knowledge system (Western/American, for example) cannot verify another system’s truth through its own standards and justifications. One must simply understand that these different systems of knowledge exist, that they influence how and what individuals know and, ultimately, how we operate in the world. Many people especially those of us who are foreigners dwelling in new homelands unconsciously switch between the multiple knowledge systems with which we develop facility. Interestingly, many students at UAlbany share this characteristic with me, as they are either immigrants or the children or grandchildren of immigrants.

When students enter my classroom, they will encounter a professor who is very aware of her ability to move between cultures and knowledge systems in other words, a person who is good at code switching. Code switching, for me, is not simply a topic of intellectual curiosity. It is the most obvious enactment of the way I, and many of my students, participate in majority and minority communities. While I cannot speak for my students, I believe that our different epistemological systems exist, and that these different systems must simply understand one another’s truth through its own standards and justifications.

Immigrant Faculty and Code Switching

By Prof. Michelle Harris

We all are undergoing an infinite process of becoming, and it is up to us to pick up the pieces of fragmented and disrupted identities and put them back together to form a new integrated whole.

Becoming American was a profound experience that ruptured what I thought was a well-fortified identity; it thrust me on a widening introspective journey to reconstruct and internalize a resistant self. Although painful and unsettling, this process has proven to be one of the most transformative experiences of my life.

Migration was a process of acquiring a few new labels, including those of immigrant and other. Migration raised consciousness about systems of privilege and oppression. Making sense of the lived experiences of pre- and postmigration sharpens one’s sensitivity to those who are othered. It heightens awareness of differential power relations; illuminates the different social, political, and economic outcomes they produce for different people; and reveals the fragile foundations of oppressive systems and their absurdities.

One knowledge system cannot verify another system’s truth through its own standards and justifications.

By Prof. Dina Refki

The roller coaster of life with its sharp twists and turns, highs and lows reminds us all that nothing is static. Nothing is constant. Our identities are fluid and are constantly in flux. We all are undergoing an infinite process of becoming, and it is up to us to pick up the pieces of fragmented and disrupted identities and put them back together to form a new integrated whole.

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Born and raised in Cairo, Egypt, I became aware of the perils of being born a woman through the inconsistencies of gender-blind parental messages that emphasized the power of education and the need to excel academically on the one hand, and the limitations placed on women’s professional potential and their socioeconomic and political participation on the other. I experienced street sexual harassment as a normalized and daily practice that conveyed a strong message that women’s presence in public space was unwelcome, that they must retreat to the invisibility of the private sphere, and that they exist as mere objects of male desire. Additionally, I experienced popular culture (specifically TV sitcoms and movies) as legitimizing patriarchal conditioning of women and men, reinforcing women’s second-class citizenship, and fortifying misogynistic and discriminatory gender roles and relations. The absence of control over one’s life was inescapable.

My earliest introduction to feminist discourse was through stumbling upon old dusty volumes of the feminist magazine Bent El Nil to which my mother subscribed and of which she kept a large stack. I shared my mother’s admiration of the magazine’s founder, Doria Shafik, a feminist icon whose signed photo, gifted to my mother, was carefully

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BENT EL NIL, FEMINIST IDEOLOGY AND EMMANCIPATORY EDUCATION
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stored. Shafik’s calls for a New Egyptian Woman in the 1950s resonated with me in the 1980s, although it looked then as if my society was moving steadily away from her progressive vision. As an undergraduate student studying English literature, I then sought to understand different feminist schools of thought, and attempted to reconcile the tensions between these ideologies and culturally grounded traditional thinking. Finally, while pursuing graduate studies, I experienced a full and complete awakening, an awakening that unapologetically adopted the label feminist and vehemently rejected any desire at reconciliation.

This awakening led me to fully embrace feminist ideologies and pursue emancipatory education. Feminist epistemology informs my research and teaching. It compels me to question power relations wherever they manifest themselves. As a teacher and a researcher, I am aware that one must constantly be conscious of the presence of the self in any space, how one’s place may reproduce unequal power relations, how one’s unconscious biases can shape encounters, and how one must promptly address symptoms of the disease inside the classroom and in community spaces.

Practicing feminism taught me that one’s success as a teacher depends on guiding students to become independent learners and thinkers and independent-minded global citizens who question constructed social realities, and to interrogate the role of unequal power in the production of knowledge. An effective teacher helps students realize and exercise fully their role of unequal power in the production of knowledge. Efforts focus on guiding development of “habitats of the mind,” and a self-resistant, self-defined identity that defies deconstruction. Channeling students’ thinking through guided inquiry and questioning, rather than lecturing, delineates feminist teaching.

Feminist research is not an end in itself but a means to alleviating community problems. It is about embracing collaborative scholarship as having a significantly higher value than sole study, because the process is as important as the outcome, and the course of bringing together many critical minds to bear on community problems produces the best possible outcome. The ethos of feminist scholarship celebrates competition against oneself and collaboration with others. It honors community knowledge and deconstructs identity binaries that tarnish our vision and cripple our potential. Becoming an immigrant conceived this feminist teacher and researcher and reshaped identities, for which I am incredibly grateful.

Dina Refki is executive director of the Center for Women in Government and Civil Society

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JOURNEYING FROM THE HUKOU SYSTEM TO SCHOLARSHIP ON HOUSING AND MIGRATION

BY PROF. YOUPIN HUANG

Born and raised in a village in China, I was officially designated a second-class citizen, together with hundreds of millions of Chinese in the countryside. China adopted the Household Responsibility (Hukou) System in the late 1950s, which divided its population into those with urban registration and those with rural registration based on where they or their parents were born and lived. People with urban registration (predominantly living in cities) were entitled to free housing, education, and medical care, and guaranteed lifetime employment, pension, and many other economic opportunities and welfare benefits, while those with rural registration had virtually no benefits. This system has served as an “internal passport system” with differentiated entitlements and strictly controlled spatial mobility, especially between the countryside and the city. An invisible wall thus has existed between urban and rural China, and many villagers are imprisoned in the countryside, as it is extremely difficult to change from rural to urban registration and to migrate from the countryside to cities.

Like millions of rural people in China, I knew from very early on that pursuing higher education and excelling in academics would be the only way for me to overcome this institutional barrier and advance myself. When a person is admitted by a college, his or her Hukou can be changed from rural to urban, and he or she can then enjoy the entitlements and opportunities associated with an urban Hukou. Of course there are additional forms of discrimination in this process. For example, a student from rural China often has to score higher than a person from Beijing or Shanghai in order to get into the same university. Nonetheless, attending college offers a visible although competitive pathway for millions of students in rural China to overcome the institutionalized discrimination embedded in the Hukou system.

I worked hard and excelled in schools, and I attended one of the best universities in China, Peking University, where I received my bachelor of arts in geography and conducted graduate study on population/demography. While having an urban registration and having overcome the largest social divide, I discovered that urban China and even colleges were not fair and just places. Many forms of social and institutional discrimination existed in urban China, such as those based on sex, origin, and social networks. I came to the United States in 1995 to further my education, focusing on population geography, and received my MA and PhD in geography from the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). In addition to significantly expanding my academic horizons, this immigration process allowed me to further overcome institutional barriers and discrimination in China. Since 2001, I have been a faculty member in the Department of Geography and Planning at UAlbany.

There is no question that my research agenda has been shaped by my personal experience, under the Hukou system. I study how the Chinese are affected by the market transition, and how the persistent institutional barriers/discrimination in (continued on pg 8)
China influence different social groups differently. My recent research has focused on housing and migration, especially low-income housing, migrants' housing, and migrants' and their families' well-being in China. Even though the Hukou system has been reformed in recent decades, it remains one of the most important institutions in China for defining a person's social status and opportunities. Now people can move freely between places within China, and millions of people from rural areas are living in cities, pursuing economic opportunities brought about by market reform. However, migrants from rural areas maintain their rural registration, and thus they and their children are denied welfare benefits in cities despite their long-term residence there. For example, migrants are not entitled to subsidized housing in cities, thus most of them have to live in informal and illegal dwellings either in villages in far suburbs or basements in cities.

Migrants' children are usually not allowed to attend public schools in cities, and they have to attend subpar "migrant schools" in cities or be left behind in villages, suffering from parental absence. Furthermore, migrants are often forced to leave cities, being scapegoated for problems and tragedies there. In other words, rural people can live and work in cities but they remain second-class citizens in China.

In addition to academic publications, I have been writing policy memos and online publications for various media based on my research to expose the plight and injustice of the lives of migrants in China, calling for profound policy change and institutional reform. My personal experience has also affected my teaching. In addition to emphasizing excellence in academics and holding my students to high standards, I actively teach and foster critical thinking. I always teach my students to be critical not only of what they learn in the classroom but also of what they experience in the world. They should never take any existing institutions/policies, especially social injustices, for granted. Because of my background, I am also more likely to bring alternative perspectives to the classroom, especially non-Western perspectives and the voices of the vulnerable. For class discussion, I often ask students to position themselves in the shoes of others, by asking questions such as: "If you were the leader of country X, what would you do? What kind of policies and programs would you implement?" and "If you were a poor farmer in India, what would you do?"

These sorts of questions force students to think as leaders and citizens in developing countries, considering local history, culture, and constraints, instead of prescribing policies from the usual Western perspective. Debates are probably the most effective way to engage students with different perspectives and train them to be critical thinkers. In four of my courses, I organize debates on controversial issues, such as the immigration policy in the U.S., the One Child Policy in China, the territorial dispute between China and Japan, and urban redevelopment versus preservation. Students have to choose real-life roles to play during the debate, and they defend and write a position paper for that chosen role. While these experiences are challenging, students have found the debates very rewarding.

Yungin Huang is an associate professor in the Department of Geography and Planning and executive director of the Confucius Institute

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I was born in Barbados to a Barbadian father and an African American mother and consequently grew up in a household where the domestic culture was always influenced by each parent's respective ambivalence toward the nationalist sentiments of the other. My mother never relinquished her United States citizenship and continues to live in Barbados as a U.S. citizen with Barbadian permanent residence. My father never sought U.S. permanent residence or citizenship and died in the late 1980s as the proud Barbadian he always was. Perhaps as a result of growing up in a household where I observed these checks and balances on each parent's would-be nationalist fervor, I developed a certain skepticism, not to say discomfort, regarding any unself-conscious championing of nationalism.

I have lived in Barbados, Jamaica, and the United States, and I continue to simultaneously admire and criticize cultural aspects of each of these countries. I have had material and intellectual experiences in each of these nations that constitute some of my most cherished memories. They speak to my sense of belonging in each culture. I have also had experiences in each of these nations that discomfituate me. These speak to my sense of “unbelonging” in each culture. In short, I am a cultural outsider in each of these territories, even as something of who I am is indebted to each culture and my diverse experiences in each place. I completed high school in Barbados, undergraduate education in the U.S., and graduate study in Jamaica. I taught for five years at the Barbados campus of the University of the West Indies (UWI) and then afterward in the U.S. academy. I bring these varied personal and professional experiences into all the classes I teach at UAlbany.

When I taught Anglophone Caribbean literature at UWI, I was able to assume that the majority of my students already knew much about the history and culture of the various Caribbean territories represented in the fiction, poetry, and drama on the syllabus. In addition, because most of my UWI students had grown up in the Caribbean, they often possessed a sense of what it meant to be British postcolonial subjects and what it means now to exist within the economic and cultural sphere of North American influence. So my UWI students had little difficulty grasping scholarly concepts related to the historical, systemic, and institutional nature of exploitation and oppression. If anything, these students sometimes found it difficult to acknowledge the potential of individual agency. They had to be challenged to see the proverbial tree in the forest because their own experiences had made them adept at perceiving the overarching influence of the latter on the former. On the other hand, when my career path led me back to the U.S. academy, I discovered that many of my students knew little of the history and cultural diversity of the Caribbean. I could not take such contextual knowledge for granted. I had to strike a balance between providing relevant historical and cultural context while emphasizing literary analysis. I also found that many of my U.S. students were predisposed to see the tree, even as they were typically reluctant to see the imprint of the forest on each tree.

As a Caribbean emigrant and U.S. immigrant, I embody the contradictory simultaneity of belonging and “unbelonging,” and I attempt to demonstrate, through my scholarship and teaching, the critical value of such a way of being in the world.

Glyne A. Griffith is associate professor and chair of the Department of English

By Prof. Glyne A. Griffith

Journeying from the Hukou System to Scholarship on Housing and Migration

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Global Scholars
Global weather

AN INTERVIEW WITH PROF. CHRIS THORNCROFT

CT: Well, I tend to be quite direct in dealing with others, tending to go straight to the point. Others complain that my email messages tend to be quite brief. More importantly, however, I think that I am able to understand and empathize with international students much more than faculty who didn’t come to the US as immigrants. I understand their experience of being far away from home and try to be supportive of them as they pursue their academic objectives.

HC: Could you speak to us about the importance of international collaboration in Atmospheric Sciences?

CT: Weather is truly a global phenomenon and as such there are no boundaries. The physics of weather is the same around the world. Although my research interest has been African weather and climate, it was not enough for me to stay in my office back in the UK and be engaged exclusively in theoretical work. I wanted to go to and experience African weather and climate myself and talk to African colleagues. They know the weather better because they live there. Our department has hosted doctoral students from Africa as well. There is a great deal of international collaboration and data sharing is normal and even necessary, because the phenomenon of weather is global.

HC: Do you believe that having international faculty in Atmospheric Sciences makes a difference?

CT: The study of global weather would quickly lose credibility if the scholars in this field were more homogeneous than is now the case. A diverse faculty brings a great deal of strength to this field. American universities in general and UAlbany are particular are quite diverse in the area of atmospheric sciences, with a great deal of international faculty as part of the team we have here. This is a real strength for us and all of these faculty, along with our American colleagues are doing really important work. This also gives us the breadth and the depth to study this field from different perspectives, both in a disciplinary sense, and from different places of origin in the world. Students benefit enormously from this.

HC: What explains your interest in Atmospheric Sciences?

CT: Well, I have always been a scientist first. I majored in Physics but I enjoyed aspects of this discipline that were more easily visualized. I stumbled across meteorology while doing my masters degree and realized that I could apply the physics of this field from different perspectives, both in a disciplinary and in a practical way. The free study I enjoyed as a student. Assessment of these group learning activities is challenging; however, if used as a supporting tool, this method can stimulate students’ interest, creativity, and drive. In contrast to the environments at German universities, the university communities in the U.S. are more diverse. By interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds during a summer internship at Yale University, I realized how much the scientific community benefits from a diverse society, like the kind that exists at UAlbany. My own research group mirrors my philosophy. I currently mentor a postdoctoral researcher as well as graduate and undergraduate students from various backgrounds. I also offer research opportunities, internships, and laboratory visits to a range of those interested in what I teach and research, from international students to local high-school students.

Christopher Thorncroft is Professor and Chair of the Department of Atmospheric and Environmental Sciences

BY PROF. GABRIELLE FUCHS

B orn, raised, and educated in Germany, I see some interesting contrasts between the two systems of higher education there and in the United States. The more I have examined these contrasts, the more I have seen the advantages and disadvantages of the two systems, and I believe that they could both gain from the benefits of the other. After high school, I studied biochemistry at Ruhr-University Bochum (RUB), a public university with some 42,000 students. The education at RUB was comparable to that of UAlbany: students learn through traditional lectures, and exams are short-answer questions. But I also experienced a contrasting educational system at Witten/Herdecke University, Germany’s first private university, of about 1,700 students, where I completed my master’s and doctorate. And I believe that this teaching approach can also apply to undergraduate education. Witten/Herdecke’s guiding idea, “encourage freedom,” asks students to take responsibility for their choices. While I was studying biochemistry, this not only meant that we could choose topics we wanted to focus on, but that we could study freely, without pressure to perform on any test or exam for two years. Rather than purely memorizing details, I was able to learn differently, to connect disciplines for myself, and to develop a bigger picture. Experiencing this freedom to explore has influenced my teaching in important ways.

This form of German education, which strongly emphasized freedom and independence, heavily influenced the concepts that laid the foundation for my teaching philosophy. Since the German education system required me to become an independent student, I have encouraged my students’ independence, both in the classroom and through our conversations. And because my professors at Witten/Herdecke used mostly alternative teaching approaches, such as discussion-based seminars and project-based and problem-based learning, I frequently incorporate project-based learning exercises into my own courses. In the freshman seminar “World of Biology,” small groups of students research and do presentations on different careers in health care. In the upper-level undergraduate course, I include a small bioinformatics project, primary literature, group discussions, and presentations. In the graduate course, I employ a more problem-based learning approach. Students present initial ideas for their research project, get feedback from the class, and then write a proposal on this topic. This student-centered learning approach reflects the free study I enjoyed as a student. Assessment of these group learning activities is challenging; however, if used as a supporting tool, this method can stimulate students’ curiosity, creativity, and drive.

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Gabriele Fuchs is an assistant professor in the Department of Biological Sciences

IMPORTING THE STRENGTHS OF THE GERMAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM TO THE UNITED STATES

Global Scholars - Spring / 2018 - Center for International Education, University at Albany
The Immigrant Anthropologist and Teaching Lessons of the Past

By Prof. Verónica Pérez Rodríguez

I grew up in a loving family in Ciudad Juárez, México. My parents are professionals but their lives were not always easy. Perhaps because of this history, my family always reminded me that I am among the lucky few in the world who get to go to school and pursue their intellectual interests. It is not uncommon in México to find people who have had to carve out a living from a place of less opportunity. On a recent trip there, my four-year-old son kept asking, with concern, about why children were selling us things in the streets of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas.

I moved to the United States from México in 1999 to pursue a doctoral degree in anthropology at the University of Georgia. At that point I did not know that this would mark the beginning of my life as an immigrant here. This life of 19 years has been both very rewarding and challenging. I earned a doctoral degree in 2003 rather quickly, since I had only three years of funding and no way to get a loan or legally get a job off campus. Afterward, I was hired at a tenure-track position at Northern Arizona University and later I joined the faculty at the University at Albany. Over time, I have earned three National Science Foundation grants and other smaller grants that have allowed me to conduct archaeological research in México.

My grandfather Rolando Guzmán had done in the 1940s. He drove a truck for the National Commission of Electricity, working to establish an electric grid in the rugged mountains of Guerrero and Chiapas. For a time he even worked as a peón at an archaeological excavation directed by the pioneering archaeologist Eulalia Guzmán. In time, my grandfather came around and was absolutely tickled by the fact that I was now directing the excavations, like Eulalia Guzmán had done in the 1940s.

Verónica Pérez Rodríguez is an assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology. She is among the lucky few in the world who get to go to school and pursue their intellectual interests. It is not uncommon in México to find people who have had to carve out a living from a place of less opportunity. On a recent trip there, my four-year-old son kept asking, with concern, about why children were selling us things in the streets of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas.

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The experience of witnessing poverty and struggle in my native México has been seared deeply into my consciousness. I recognize that beyond teaching anthropology to my students, I must impress upon them how fortunate they are to have this rare experience (relatively speaking) of pursuing a college degree and how crucial it is that they contribute something to the improvement of the world and the living conditions of others. Through my teaching, I try to offer my students a perspective that goes beyond the walls of the classroom and beyond the made-up borders of modern nation-states, and archaeology is a powerful tool for doing this. With my students I can talk about the dozens of cities, nations, states, and empires that have come and gone, and I work very hard to make these facts brought to life by archaeology relevant to our world today.

How can we make sure our cities do not fail? What makes a society resilient? What are the social and environmental costs of power and empire? How can we learn from the mistakes of our past?

In teaching, I remind my students that there are many other ways to live and view the world and that worldviews absolutely different from our own existed and thrived for millennia. Through archaeology I try to teach them that our way of life is just that: one way of life, one among thousands, and not the true or the best way to do things. This exercise allows us to question things that we never questioned before about our lives and our societies. We are just one more experiment in the history of humanity. I encourage my students to travel and seek opportunities to see the world through other people’s eyes and conditions, at home or abroad. And to do this, no other tools are more powerful than traveling and learning another language. I remind them that learning languages is one of the main pillars of being human and a great way to challenge our minds. Ultimately, I ask from my students that they do not shy away from a challenge, that they work hard (remembering that this is the minimum requirement for everything they do in life), and that if they are not given an opportunity, they should seize it.

Verónica Pérez Rodríguez is an assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology.
The Impact of Immigration on the Immigrant Scholar

By Prof. Elizabeth Vasquez

I was born and raised in the Dominican Republic, a Caribbean country that shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti. I was raised by my grandparents in the capital city, Santo Domingo. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, my father faced political persecution and this forced our family (including my father and my siblings) to migrate to the United States in the early 1990s. At the time of our forced migration, I was attending the Instituto Tecnológico de Santo Domingo, completing my bachelor’s of medicine. After the shock of migration and relocation, I had to rethink my education and career choices. Spanish is my native language, and when I migrated to the United States, I did not speak English. This new reality hindered me from taking the medical exam and transferring my college credits. After consulting with my dad, we decided that I would best benefit by attending college to learn English. I applied to many City University of New York schools and was accepted at York College, where I earned a BSc in gerontology.

In addition to my status as a first-generation Afro-Caribbean immigrant, my strong Dominican heritage inspired my desire to pursue doctoral training. Finally confident in my bilingual abilities, I completed a master’s in public health at Columbia University School of Public Health and a Doctor of Public Health degree at the School of Public Health at New York Medical College. With these credentials, I obtained broad interdisciplinary training, including a strong foundation in the theories and practices of epidemiology. I believe that my educational training, immigration experiences, and upbringing with my grandparents provided me with the necessary skills to conduct relevant scholarly work that addresses health disparities among the minority aging populations. In addition, my training and experiences as a first-generation immigrant propel me to contribute to current gaps in the literature related to public health and aging, with a focus on elderly populations of color.

My responsibilities as a younger immigrant provided me with excellent tools for integrating into U.S. culture and new insights into how this status has affected my career trajectory. For example, my parents did not speak English and therefore relied on my siblings and me to translate for them as they navigated the system to secure housing and receive appropriate healthcare. The skills I acquired from balancing my education and family needs helped me to become self-sufficient and to provide emotional support for my parents, who could not fully inhabit an English-speaking world. It also gave me insights into how generational status influences the immigrant experience. I think for many of us it may be easy to understand immigration in theory, but not many may grasp the emotional and physical weight of its real-world application and how it transforms the established roles of families, rendering some members of the household mute and invisible. It was not an easy transition, but this learning process is now an integral part of my teaching strategies.

I see myself between two cultures and I do not belong completely to either one. I am not the stereotypical Dominican woman and I am not a fully assimilated U.S. citizen. Furthermore, my status as Afro-Caribbean also places me within my self-identified worlds: Latina and black. This tension helps me to stay connected through writing bilingually and thinking about the intersection of the two worlds, which I believe enables me to better understand how hard it is for some of the students I encounter who, like me, live in two different worlds.

My time at the UAlbany School of Public Health has been greatly appreciated. My students never receive multiple-choice tasks that may restrict their creativity. They get or accommodate new experience, information, and knowledge. I think both my teaching and research represent a synergetic blend of my experience in my birth country and in the U.S. My teaching style is governed by a blend of an instructor-centered and a student-centered approach in which the teacher is both a facilitator and a source of knowledge. European rigor, focus, and cohesion are paired with a more relaxed teaching style, where diversity of student opinions is greatly appreciated. My students never receive multiple-choice tasks that may restrict their creativity. They get or look for facts that help them develop one of the right ways to solving a problem or task.

My research has greatly benefited from my moving to the U.S. European scholars are usually said to prefer rational ways of knowing, while Americans are presented as preferring empirical ways of knowing. Americans may be more “realist,” hard-determinist, or libertarian in research than Europeans. I think my research tends to amalgamate the two approaches. That is why I am interested in pragmatics that investigates how the language system is put to use in social encounters between human beings. I firmly believe that to understand language we need to look further than just the formal system of signs. Meaning is created by people who use the system as a tool to express their intention and understand each other. Immigration has a lot to offer for everyone but only if the immigrant is open to what is new, unusual, and/or not experienced before. If he or she is ready to explore the new environment, makes an effort to understand it, tries to become a part of it, and makes the necessary changes in life, that will be beneficial not only for that individual but also for the new environment.

Istvan Kecskes is a Distinguished Professor in the Department of Communication and the Department of Educational Theory and Practice.

By Prof. Istvan Kecskes

I came to the United States from Hungary as a Fulbright professor in 1989. I was interested in computational linguistics and computer-assisted language learning, so I spent a semester at the Computer-Assisted Language Instruction Consortium (CALICO), which was in the linguistics department of Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. The department offered me a contract, but I decided to return to Hungary because the first free election was being held in the spring of 1990, and I hoped that with the socialist regime gone, something new would happen in the country. However, not much changed, except that the former socialists became the new “democrats.” So I returned to the U.S. in the fall of 1990. After working at Duke University and the University of Montana, I accepted a full professorship at the State University of New York, Albany, in 1999.

I came to this country not as a refugee. I did not immigrate to the U.S. because of economic reasons, either. I was probably one of the youngest full professors in Hungary in 1990. What motivated me was a better professional opportunity for my family and for myself. My daughter wanted to be a fashion designer and my son studied computer science. Both have achieved their goals and work in Manhattan now. Research usually talks about immigrants’ identity as fluid and multiple. I do not believe in multiple identities. One has one identity that is flexible, dynamic, and adjustable to accommodate new experience, information, and knowledge. I think my research tends to amalgamate the two approaches. That is why I am interested in pragmatics that investigates how the language system is put to use in social encounters between human beings. I firmly believe that to understand language we need to look further than just the formal system of signs. Meaning is created by people who use the system as a tool to express their intention and understand each other.
Finding a Balance Between Teaching Specific Skills and Teaching Conceptual Knowledge

BY PROF. SIWEI LYU

I believe the place, language, and culture of our birth can be the most valuable attributes that shape our identities. These formative cultural experiences can also prove to be huge influences on our teaching and research.

I grew up in Shenyang, a northeastern industrial city in China. My father was a civil engineer in a large local firm, and my mother worked in a local government office. My parents’ education and career backgrounds affected me in choosing my own career in science and engineering, but I was also deeply interested in Chinese history and culture.

Then, 17 years ago, I moved to the United States to pursue my doctoral degree in computer science. After years of graduate education, I eventually became a faculty member in UAlbany’s Department of Computer Science. My dual cultural background has benefited my research career and teaching in profound ways that I have only recently come to acknowledge.

The opportunities to teach and work with students and to develop new educational materials and techniques are my primary reasons for seeking an academic career. Looking back on the past decade, this has been one of the most rewarding experiences for me as a faculty member.

My students have been, in part, inspirational, brilliant, funny, maddening, puzzling, and, more than anything, educational. It is by observing and interacting with them that I started to develop my own teaching style and principles.

The most important message I want to convey to my students through teaching is that computer science is interesting, relevant, and fun. A student who is curious and interested in the subject is easy to teach; unfortunately, not all students arrive in the classroom in this state of mind. I take it as my responsibility to present the subject in an interesting and engaging manner that shows the elegance and beauty of computer science, as well as its applicability to solving concrete real-world problems. With the incredibly fast pace at which knowledge and technology evolve, it is not sufficient to simply teach the students to use the latest popular tools. As Confucius put it, “Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime.” In all of my courses, I have tried to find a balance between teaching specific skills and building a broad base onto which future concepts can be built.

Research has always been the centripetal force of my academic career. The path of my scientific exploration over the past decade at UAlbany has wound across many fields, and as a result, I am more of a cross between an electrical engineer, an applied mathematician, and a computer scientist. Yet the scientific thread running through my scholarly activities is a unique interest in the main fields of artificial intelligence, including machine learning, machine vision, and robotics. Being a first-generation immigrant to the United States and possessing multiple cultural backgrounds has provided me with a unique vantage point in my teaching and research.

Siwei Lyu is an associate professor in the Department of Computer Science.

A little over 20 years ago, I came from France to the United States as a teaching assistant of French and German. I grew up in France, and thanks to European educational exchanges and a scholarship from the European Erasmus program, I had already studied four foreign languages and lived in both England and Germany. Initially, my main reason for living, studying, and working abroad was to increase my fluency in the local languages and to be exposed to foreign cultures. At that point, I was still what Michael Byram, a scholar in the field of intercultural communicative competence, would call a tourist, that is, I sought ways of learning about other cultures without having my own beliefs and habits changed by these experiences. However, after I chose to settle in the U.S., I became, to some extent, just like many other immigrant faculty, a sojourner, someone “who produces effects on a society which challenge its unquestioned and unconscious beliefs, behaviours and meanings, and whose own beliefs, behaviours and meanings are in turn challenged and expected to change” (from Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters, 1997).

I underwent a long process of acculturation, learning about new norms and behaviors, beliefs and assumptions, which led me to think more about the importance of intercultural learning and directly affected my teaching and research. For nearly a decade, I have been incorporating in my classes the use of online platforms that allow students to engage with native speakers of French. This practice, which originated in Western Europe, allows them not only to develop their linguistic competence, but more important, their intercultural competence. For most, this is their first opportunity to see if they are able to carry on an authentic, meaningful conversation in French, and to socialize with peers who are in and from a foreign country. I encourage my students to think critically about both Francophone cultures and their own, and foster the development of their ability to understand other cultures and communicate with natives of these cultures. I present them with strategies to become competent language learners and global travelers, as many of them will experience study abroad and/or seek ways to further their language studies even outside of the university.

Growing up in an educational environment that highlights the importance of foreign language learning, critical thinking, and experiential language and culture learning through sister-city exchanges or school partnerships with neighboring countries has led me to a path and ultimately to a formative experience as an immigrant faculty member. In turn, this informs what and how I teach my students.

Whether being proficient in one or more foreign languages will be essential or simply instrumental to our students’ future professional and life goals, having the ability to be open and relate to people of other cultures and languages will be critical to their becoming global citizens.

Véronique Martin is a lecturer in the Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures, and a liaison for the University in the High School Program.
Learning to Ask Questions That Have Not Been Answered

By Prof. Valdimir Kuperman

Being born in Russia, I have experienced the old Soviet educational system as a student and new Westernized ideas as a professor. Teaching has always been a challenge for me because of my parents’ careers as university professors. Though I used to be an engineer, a researcher, an entrepreneur with considerable success, I have never stopped university teaching, with one exception. In the late 1990s, I came to feel that I had nothing more to say to students and I dedicated myself to a new area of research for two years, which took me from the world of artificial intelligence to the world of global networks.

This two-year research endeavor was preceded by my study of networking through a grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce and the help of the Albany-Tula Alliance (a not-for-profit NGO). This project included my first visit to the United States and resulted not only in a new experience, new knowledge, and new friends, but in a new business venture as well. With a group of software engineers, for six years we developed applications for American companies. Eight years later, life brought me to the United States as a permanent resident, and here I have devoted my entire career to teaching. I see teaching as one of the most critical issues and important challenges in today’s world. My academic interests became concentrated on knowledge delivery and the potential use of technology in education. Universities in Russia were created as a mix of classical German and French university standards. Under the German approach, students work closely with professors, learning how problems are analyzed and how solutions are created, while French standards refer to a more formal education. It seems that in Russia I was an “Americanized” professor, offering more freedom to my students. Teaching different technologies for many years, I was leading students to understand the principles and how to evaluate results. I was the first step to ultimate success.

Vladimir Kuperman is a professor of practice in the Department of Computer Science.

Leveraging a Rigorous Academic Preparation for Service as an Immigrant Faculty

By Prof. Daphney-Stavroula Zois

I am an Assistant Professor in Electrical and Computer Engineering at the University at Albany. I am originally from Greece, where I received my Bachelor in Computer Engineering & Informatics. I also hold an MSc and a PhD in Electrical Engineering from the University of Southern California and I was a postdoctoral research associate with the Coordinated Science Laboratory at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign before joining UAlbany.

Growing up in Greece has definitely impacted various aspects of my teaching. For one, it has impacted the assumptions I made about student preparations and student commitments. For example, I use to assume that all students came to college equipped with the same formal rigorous training in basic science (mathematics, physics, biology, chemistry), irrespective of which school they attended. I am really amazed that in the US, this is not the case. Furthermore, I assume that students attending engineering classes are already committed to become an engineer. This comes from the fact that in Greece, we have to choose our profession while still in high school, since seniors are directly admitted to a specific major when they begin college. This is of course not the case in the US, and many students begin as freshmen quite undecided about what they wish to pursue as a major. My undergraduate experience in Greece also provided me with a strong grounding in engineering. During the required five-year program of engineering, I studied a variety of topics, some of which would be offered only at the graduate level in the US. My undergraduate experience also required the completion of a number of hands-on projects, a process that taught me how to solve engineering problems in practice. I am therefore able to leverage this rigorous preparation in engineering in my teaching and research activity.

My belief that everyone should have the right to a proper education and access to various educational opportunities is a reflection of the values with which I was raised in Greek society. Therefore, I invest a great deal in trying to help as many students as possible to understand the material I teach and to succeed, irrespective of their backgrounds. Being raised in Greece also helped me to understand the value of working hard and being passionate about my field as a way of being able to pursue advanced degrees at a reputable institution in the US. Success in the US as an immigrant has demanded that I continue to work hard in the various areas of endeavor I pursue and I try to consciously model this to my students.

While I teach, I also provide examples of how my undergraduate training has enabled me to become a successful engineer as well as how I addressed the challenges that I faced. I try to compare how the different education systems that I have been exposed to has shaped my personality and illustrate how students can benefit by making the right choices. As an individual growing up in Greece, Nevertheless, irrespective of my own experiences and culturally diverse background, I try to adapt my teaching approach to the unique characteristics of the US student body, while at the same time, stressing the importance of a proper and solid education.

Daphney-Stavroula Zois is an Assistant Professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering.
Immigrant Faculty and Their Role in Internationalizing the Academy

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petroleum engineering, 79 percent in computer science, 75 percent in civil engineering, 69 percent in statistics, 67 percent in mechanical engineering and economics, 59 percent in civil engineering, and 57 percent in chemical engineering. In effect, dozens of academic departments at U.S. universities, particularly in STEM fields, would cease to exist if international students were to decide to go elsewhere.

The significance of this story does not end with the numbers. In 2016, a study in Science magazine found that foreign-born professors account for 16 percent of US Nobel Prizes in science. The importance of this story does not end with the numbers, and who, to a greater or lesser degree, are able to articulate different scholarly pathways, but who have been marked by the influences of the cultures in which they were raised.

This semester's issue of Global Synergies explores the stories and statistics behind the numbers.

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understanding of “culture” as flexible rather than rigid, and most important, that cultural particularities are something to be valued and celebrated. Another way that my foreignness is a factor in the classroom (and may give students a qualitatively different experience from one they might have with a U.S.-born professor) is the way I can use it as a teaching resource. Students can be hostile to foreigners who say anything even remotely critical of the U.S. and of the students’ ways of life. They may also expect instructors to portray life in their home countries in ways that conform to stereotypes and prejudices, even if the instructor sees her or his own country in a very different light. If confronted with this situation, I use my foreignness as a teaching resource. Sometimes this involves relating authentic first-person information about events occurring abroad, but it can also involve providing contrasting perspectives on events and places.

At the end of the day, students benefit most from having a diverse group of caring and informed faculty foreign or native-born who are invested in their intellectual growth. Who I am, what I know, and how I impart it may vary from who another colleague may be or do, but my early life in a different culture allows me to bring a new element, a different perspective, a somewhat unique way of taking on the world that would not have been possible if that cultural baggage were not part of my professional portfolio.

Michelle Harris is a professor in the Department of African American Studies and director of the Institute for Global Indigeneity.