

Gaining a Foothold in Four Years through Four Personal Stories

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As if we were members of a symphony orchestra, I happened to be chosen as the first violin. Hope I'm starting with a right note.

My name is Lin Lin, an assistant professor of social studies education in the Department of Childhood/Early Childhood Education, from SUNY Cortland.

I'm grateful for having this opportunity to participate in this panel discussion and to examine challenges we face as international female faculty in higher education. I'd like to share four personal stories to respond to the questions all panelists were asked to address.

Panel Discussion Guiding Questions:

1. how do you address family-work balance as transnational faculty?
2. What leadership opportunities have you been afforded? What has been the role of mentoring to obtain them?
3. Please address campus climate issues and intercultural communication, as you see fit: (e.g., publishing scholarly work in your native language, English as second language, CTEs, dress styles, intercultural communication, race, ethnicity and importantly gender)
4. For those who obtain greencard through employment: How (If at all) did the process to obtain your greencard influence your decision to come to Cortland ?
5. Please comment on the process of labor certification/greencard vis-a-vis the process of tenure/promotion

Story 1: Settling for more or less – salary inequity in invisible veins.

I hope the first story addresses the question, “How (If at all) did the process to obtain your greencard influence your decision to come to Cortland?” Over the years, I was asked many times why I chose to come to SUNY Cortland. I would always respond that it was SUNY Cortland that chose me.

My American journey can be shortened as ABC. I arrived in Athens, Georgia for the doctoral program in social science education at the University of Georgia in 2000. I graduated from University of Georgia in 2004, and decided to stay home to recuperate from my back

surgery and take care of my new-born son for a year while I was looking for a job. Any international students graduating from a US higher education institution enjoys one year on an OPT status. OPT refers to Optional Practical Training and lasts only for one year. If I fail to find a job within one year, I have the option of returning to my homeland or switching to F-2 status as a dependent of my husband, who was a student at that time. F-2 dependents do not have employment authorization. When SUNY Cortland offered me this job four years ago as the first school among all the schools that interviewed me, I jumped at the opportunity, believing that SUNY Cortland will apply for employment authorization before my OPT expired.

Under this situation, I did not do a good job bargaining for a higher starting salary with so little bargaining power. When they told me the highest they can offer was \$42,000, all what I was thinking was that I needed this job NOW to support my family.

I could have argued for a better deal using my prior working experience as an associate professor at Beijing Foreign Studies University in China before I came to study in 2000. I highly doubt that would have added to my bargaining chips. My colleagues might still remember that I had to ask my husband to drive me here for the campus interview for I could not even renew my driver's license according to the regulations of the USCIS – Immigration Services. I do hear from others some more successful stories of bargaining for a higher salary. The international faculty members are rare in such cases.

Please do not get me wrong. I'm very grateful that SUNY Cortland is applying for green card for me and other international faculty members. The school covers the application expenses and legal fees for me. I'm forever grateful for this. Human Resources Officers have been very supportive in the process. However, paying for the applications of the family members is still a huge challenge for me and many other faculty members on campus.

In the last four years, every time I had to pay a large sum of money as legal fees or processing fees for my family members' application for permanent residence, I thought of my unsuccessful salary bargaining experience. I would wish that the higher education should really pay international faculty more, not less, than their native-born colleagues from the United States. You have no idea how much more money we have to spend covering expenses of filing various forms, updating biometrics at immigration centers as if our finger prints still change in adulthood, and renewing our H-1B status in order to work here every year. You have no idea how many hours we have to spend traveling to New York City to get biometrics done, completing various forms, which should be completed by the attorney whom we pay for his over-expensive services.

Story 2: Being victimized by the racist immigration process.

Whoever is unfortunate enough to go through the permanent residence application (aka green card) knows that first of all, the application is neither green nor permanent. The greencard application process takes a long time. We came in fall 2005, and we were recently been informed

that our applications are more likely to be processed for at least another year. While we are waiting, every time we travel abroad, we have to renew AP – advanced parole in order to come back to the states. Otherwise, we have to go through a more lengthy and excruciating process to secure visa for our return. While SUNY Cortland covers my AP renewal application, I pay for my family members' application fees. Such expenses become a standing item on our checkbook.

Due to the slow green card application, my husband has a hard time finding a job in this highly competitive and depressing job market. It is not rare for international faculty members to have spouses working at different locations. When they do, mothers work with a full teaching load as single moms who are responsible for their young children. Work load of this nature has been very stressful for me personally.

My husband has been working in New York City and now works abroad for the Beijing office of the same company. He could have made a choice of quitting the job and moved here. He took a no-pay leave in spring this year just to be home with the children so that I could stay more focused on my research project during Drescher leave and get ready my reappointment and promotion portfolios. My family cannot afford losing his income. The separation of married couples and separation of family life are also taking a huge toll on me.

The marginalized people have no power to influence policy making about immigration. The delay of the application process is due to the lack of advocacy for people like me and many other international faculty members who are going through this process.

Story 3: Getting tenured with a foreign accent.

This story addresses the question, “how do you address family-work balance as transnational faculty?” I believe that I don't have to become a department chair or Dean of my school of education, or Provost of the whole campus to be a leader. I can be the agent in a micro-community such as my classroom and my department. If I can't see the changes I want to take place, I choose to be the change. I choose to model for our teacher candidates so that they all share leadership as a core value in our teacher education programs.

I choose to be a leader by staying true to who I am through my work ethnics, cultural values, taking the initiative to change the culture of the department. The first semester, three new hires initiated a multicultural dinner in the department. In my courses, I model culturally responsive/relevant teaching by attending to students' needs and interests, keeping rigorous syllabus and meaningful assignments to promote academic excellence in the hope of transforming students from grade-oriented to learning oriented.

In class, I always tell my students that I might speak with an accent, but I don't think with an accent. In the first semester I taught here, I was only able to keep one foot ahead of my students. Coming to this new territory, I taught as if I was driving in the dark. I could only see this much ahead of me every day. Now, four years later, I can say that I am teaching with so much more confidence. Observational reports of my colleagues who came to observe me teach and my CTEs in all courses I have taught are very positive and I have been taking students' comments seriously. Recently I submitted my portfolio for tenure review. Next month, I will submit a similar portfolio for promotion review. One of my five peer-reviewed journal publications has been accredited even though it was published in Chinese on a renowned Chinese journal "*History Teaching*."

I believe all of us are juggling so many things at the same time and all of us have to prioritize to get by each day. Teaching is always my priority every day as a teacher. Then I balance the rest of my life not to be in conflict with this prioritized item. Balancing is never easy, but I am trying hard to balance teaching with the fun of being with my children after 4:30pm every day of the week and being with them the whole weekend. I am balancing teaching with spending some time regularly with my Chinese friends in face-to-face conversations or over the phone. I have to confess that I have very few non-Asian friends in town, who I could expect to visit me on a rainy or snowy evening, and who would bring us food when I was too sick to stand up preparing the next meal. Perhaps I should reach out more to make non-Asian friends, who want to be friends with me. I balance my teaching with conducting scholarly work, which always enriches my teaching in so many ways that I can hardly ignore. I balance my professional life with an annual long-distance travel back to my home country to be with my recently-widowed mother and my 94-year old grandmother. I balance my professional life with watching Chinese soap operas at home simply to keep being ethnically Chinese while the U.S. TV network keeps us marginalized as audience that they do not want to reach. All in all, balancing as a transnational faculty is not an easy thing.

Story 4: Don't Feed Me to the Lions YET.

When I first came to SUNY Cortland, the support I received from my department and from the campus was enormous. Over the years, it is a saddening experience for me to realize that the support came to a trickle. I understand that I'm not a new faculty member any more, that I must stand up on my own feet, and that I must be mature enough to weather all storms even when the storms are challenging and new to me. I enjoy the freedom to grow, but at the same time, I would like to see a campus climate that continues to be supportive to all faculty members even after they become tenured, even after they gain a foothold over the years. I applaud that we have a WFC on campus, but would like to see more rigorous efforts in this aspect to keep all of us supported, regardless of work experiences, regardless of our ethnic and racial diversity. A

sustainable support system must be in place to keep SUNY Cortland's faculty team strong and healthy.

In terms of leadership opportunities, I served as the chair for the Equity and Diversity Committee of my department until it dissolved recently. Recently I was elected Chair of Curriculum Committee for the School of Education. I was elected because I confessed that I knew very little about the curriculum review process of the school and that of the whole college. Learning by doing is the best way to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for providing such a service.

I'm truly grateful for having this job, bringing in two-year prior service, having the Drescher research leave, and taking a no-pay leave to take care of my sick father in China before he passed away in 2007. I'm sincerely thankful for having mentors in and outside my department. My colleagues and academic advisors at the University of Georgia continue to mentor me through the years. I succeeded in collaborating with international faculty members to publish journal articles on using multiple perspectives to teach about historical events, and publishing in my native language.

Increasing diversity doesn't mean going out and start hiring more faculty of color. It's changing the chilly climate of apathy towards problems of a minority group. Simply because we are a small number does not mean our needs do not have to be met. So, please do not feel me to the lions yet.