

7-11-2012

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Recommended Citation

Miller, Marilyn Dr. and Blachford, Dongyan R. Dr. (2012) "A Model for a Sustainable Partnership: Connecting Chinese Visiting Scholars, the University and the Community," *Canadian and International Education / Education canadienne et internationale*: Vol. 41: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cie-eci/vol41/iss1/3>

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**A Model for a Sustainable Partnership: Connecting Chinese Visiting
Scholars, the University and the Community**
**Modèle pour une coopération durable:
entre professeurs invités, université et communauté**

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Abstract

Using the case of Chinese visiting scholars at one western Canadian University, this two-phase research project explores how fostering collaboration between international visiting scholars, the host university, and the community promotes internationalization. The first phase examines the impact of the visiting scholars' social interaction on and off campus on the satisfaction and success of their stay in Canada. Based on these findings, phase two addresses ways the community could benefit from interacting with international visitors. As a result, a partnership model is proposed which connects the interests of the university, international visitors, and the local community and emphasizes mutual benefit, shared learning, cross cultural understanding, collaboration and sustainability.

Résumé

Ce projet de recherche en deux phases explore comment promouvoir l'internationalisation en encourageant la collaboration entre les professeurs invités, l'université et la communauté. Ce projet se base sur le cas concret d'un professeur chinois invité à une université canadienne. La première phase analyse le niveau de satisfaction et de succès du professeur invité dans toutes ses interactions sociales, dans et en dehors de l'université. La deuxième phase du projet reprend les résultats de la première phase et propose différentes interactions entre le professeur invité et la communauté, interactions favorables dans les deux sens. En conclusion, l'article propose un modèle de collaboration qui développe des intérêts conjoints entre l'université, le visiteur international et la communauté. Ce type de modèle met l'accent sur les bénéfices et l'apprentissage partagés, la compréhension interculturelle, la collaboration et la viabilité

Introduction

Many universities have seen an increasing number of Chinese visiting scholars spend a significant amount of time in their institutions (Zweig, Changgui & Rosen, 2004). While universities recognize visiting scholars as an important part of their international activity, little is known about the quality of the social exchange with visiting scholars both on and off campus and the impact of such international programs on personal, social and economic goals of all those participating. Even less is known about the local community's knowledge and reaction towards visiting scholars and the potential benefits arising from interacting with them.

With the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the new leadership under Deng Xiaoping, came a major policy shift in China from a focus on political development to one of economic pursuit. Among other things this led to new policies and strategies in the area of higher education. One of the initiatives to

support the goal of modernizing the nation was the Chinese visiting scholars program--visiting scholar is a term originally used by the Chinese Government to describe scholars sent abroad to institutions of higher education to further their training instead of studying for degrees. Especially in the early years of this program, it was deemed an efficient way to upgrade credentials and training of existing faculty members. Thus, upgrading became one of the long-term strategies for development in education. The period abroad generally ranged from several months to 2 years. Later, the concept was broadened to include anyone who studied or conducted research in a foreign university without pursuing a degree. In higher education, it was manifested in a two-way investment: inviting foreign experts to teach in Chinese universities and sending students and staff overseas to learn the “advanced technology mainly from the west” (Zwieg et al. 2004).

In a study of over 200 Chinese visiting scholars (CVS) at the University of Illinois, Shoresman (1998) concluded that “the Visiting Scholars Programme was an example of an educational policy that paid high returns ” (p.95). A large scale study carried out by Zweig et al. showed that there is no doubt that the returnees were significant contributors to economic growth, technology and skill transfer, but very little was known about their social impact on both the home and host country. Leyton-Brown and Blachford (2010) went beyond the returnees’ impact on China’s economic growth, and studied their social impact. The results of this research suggest the impact is multi-faceted, that the returnees have experienced things beyond the classroom that have influenced their attitudes, changed the ways they see society, and the ways they live their personal and professional lives.

The vast literature on internationalization and universities focuses on international activities that include academic exchanges, internationalizing the curriculum and policies and strategies in higher education. Many universities include visiting scholars in their international activities, such as asking them to lecture, exchange information with faculty and students, and strengthen the relationship between the host and home institutions (Bao & Ferrara, 2009; Huang & Klinger, 2006; Sowa, 2002). Internationalizing the curriculum is generally concerned with increasing faculty awareness about how one might integrate an international and intercultural perspective into the practice of teaching and learning (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2009; Fuller, 2009; Williams, 2010). While a wider array of methods is used to internationalize the curriculum in Canadian Universities, neither the visiting scholars nor the local community are generally identified as participants that can play a critical role in this process.

Knight (2004) defines internationalization as the “process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education” (p. 11). Building on her previous work (2003), she broadens the concept of international strategies to include a level of community involvement. In the literature there is much discussion about what constitutes policy, practices and strategies in internationalizing higher education, either focused on the home institution or partner institutions (Chan, 2004; Huang, 2003; Khem & Teichler, 2007; Stohl, 2007). For example, Huang’s article (2003) outlines important strategies in China in higher education that have influenced students and scholars to study abroad. However, the reality of practice in most higher education institutions still remains limited to either the local campus or the campus of the partner institutions.

While universities recognize the importance of visiting scholars as part of building international relationships in addition to the promotion of research and scholarly work (Knight, 2004; Paige, 2003), only a handful of articles relate to visiting scholars, and these predominantly focus on their experience in the academic setting (Guo, Brooke & Yan, 2002; Krumrey-Fulks, 2001; Zhao, 2008). Little attention has been paid to the relationship between social interaction and the overall quality of the visiting scholars’ experience and their actions off-campus and relationships with the local community.

In an attempt to fill in the gaps identified in the literature, the impact of the visiting scholars’ social interaction on and off campus was the focus of the first phase of this study. In addition, the study also explored the mutual impact on the host institution, the scholars and the community in terms of cultural understanding and mutual economic, social, and political development.

The university under study is located in the capital city of a mid-western province in Canada. With a population of approximately 200,000, the city is becoming increasingly diverse through economic growth and an encouraging immigration policy. The university is a comprehensive mid-sized institution serving 12,000 full and part-time students. Its 10 faculties offer a variety of undergraduate and graduate degrees. The Chinese Visiting Scholar Program at the university was established in the early 1980’s. This university was the first Canadian university to establish a formal twinning relationship with Chinese higher education institutions after the opening up of the People’s Republic of China in the late 1970’s, and the university has annually hosted a number of Chinese visiting scholars mainly from post-secondary institutions but also from Chinese government agencies and the private sector. Since the beginning of the program, over 300 scholars have participated in the program.

Using the case of Chinese visiting scholars at one Canadian University, the research sought to address the following questions:

- (1) In what ways might enhanced social interaction on the campus and in the community contribute to the quality and satisfaction of the experience of these visitors?
- (2) In what ways might the university be able to play a leadership and bridging role to extend the benefits of its Chinese visiting scholars beyond the campus to the wider community?
- (3) Is there a model that can address the need for a coordinated, cooperative and sustained partnership between the university and the wider community?

In the first phase of the study, the focus was on the first two questions. An unexpected finding of this phase of the study was the extent to which the community, including government, business and other organizations recognized the benefit of interacting with Chinese visiting scholars in order to build stronger ties both with China and the University. Building on the first phase, the second phase of the research involved additional follow up and discussion with the scholars and the community, and a proposal for the development of a sustainable partnership model.

Methodology

The research was conducted in two phases. In the first phase the researchers set out to obtain information that could assist the university in determining strategies to develop culturally sensitive and mutually beneficial social activities among the visiting scholars, university community and the community at large. In order to gain multiple perspectives on these issues, a combination of quantitative research methods (surveys) and qualitative methods (interviews and focus groups) were used in this study to provide methodological triangulation. Triangulation allowed the researchers to employ a number of methods to cross examine the research problem and identify overlapping or reinforcing themes (Denzin, 1978; Jick, 1979).

The survey we designed for the Chinese Visiting Scholars was available in both Chinese and English and could be completed online or in a paper-based format in either language. The university's international office sent the survey to all CVS currently on campus as well as to those who had recently returned home. Thirteen visiting scholars responded to the survey, nine in English and four in Chinese. Approximately half of those who responded to the Chinese Visiting Scholar survey identified themselves as university professors, 23% as government officials and 23% as 'other'. The scholar's average length of stay in

our country was six to twelve months. In both this survey and the university community survey participants were asked to identify issues, concerns and barriers that relate to key aspects of social interactions between the visitors and the campus community. As well, we sought suggestions for enhancing the visiting scholar experience. The CVS survey consisted of 50 questions in 12 categories. In addition, the survey of the Chinese visiting scholars was followed up by two focus groups to gain a more in-depth understanding of their experiences. An e-mail was sent out by the international office to all current CVS inviting them to participate in the groups. Information about what a focus group is and what they could expect, as well as list of questions for discussion were included with the invitation. Ten CVS participated in each group. One participant, who was unable to attend, volunteered to provide his feedback in writing.

An e-mail explaining the purpose of the research and a link to completing the university survey online was sent to university administrators, faculty and staff. Twenty-four responses were received. The online survey for the university community consisted of 40 questions in 12 categories. The survey of the university community was followed up with individual interviews with key players working in the area of internationalization in the institution. Using semi-structured interviews, a total of four interviews were held with the Vice-President (Research and Internationalization), Director of the International Office, Associate Vice-President, (Student Affairs) and Director of the Student Success Office.

Purposeful sampling was used to select representatives from the local community. The researchers selected those we knew had some previous interaction with the visiting scholars as well as those we felt might benefit from contact with them in the future. The researchers initially contacted the local community by telephone to determine interest. A total of seventeen local community organizations volunteered to participate in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately one hour. The sample included key players from government agencies at the provincial and municipal level, business, trade, and local economic development organizations, research centres, and local Chinese associations. Questions asked related to their awareness of the visiting scholar program, its relevancy to the community, and suggestions for future opportunities that would be mutually beneficial.

Phase one provided us with basic information regarding the nature of the interaction and opportunities for future interaction. What stood out were the overwhelming interest, support, and expressed willingness by the local community to explore further interaction with the scholars. Encouraged by this

response, a second phase of the research was initiated to follow up with interested organizations in the community. In this phase the focus was not only on their interests, but to establish avenues for a more organized, coordinated and sustainable model of partnership between the university, Visiting Scholar Program and these organizations.

In the second phase, after implementing some of the activities as a result of phase one, follow up interviews were conducted with selected representatives in the local community. To further implement suggestions, future plans and possibilities for a more formal partnership with the university was discussed. Four follow up interviews were conducted with government agencies, the Chamber of Commerce and a local development office. A further focus group with the visiting scholars was conducted to seek their feedback on the effectiveness of activities developed as a result of phase one of the study as well as solicit suggestions for future program development.

Findings and Discussion

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the three sources of data: surveys, interviews and focus groups. Initially data was coded into thematic categories. Corbin and Strauss (2008) suggest coding "...means putting aside preconceived notions about what the researcher expects to find in the research, and letting the data and interpretation of it guide analysis" (p. 160). The three thematic categories that emerged from the data were the importance of social interaction, the value of a mutually beneficial relationship, and the need for a sustainable partnership model. The first thematic category, social interaction, included respondents' assessment of the current reality, major challenges and ways to overcome them. The second thematic category emphasized mutual benefit, with each group of respondents recognizing the value of two-way information sharing in order to enhance social and cultural understanding and to build a stronger social and economic relationship between the two countries. The identification by all three groups of the need for a sustainable partnership model was the essence of the third category. Participants in the surveys, focus groups, and local community interviews often provided reinforcing and overlapping information. The voices of the university community, Chinese Visiting Scholars and the local community framed the structure of the data presented for this paper.

Importance of Social Interaction: reality, challenges, and ways forward

University Community

While the majority of those who responded were aware of the visiting scholars, more than half had never interacted with them in a social context, that is, outside

of work. The overwhelming majority thought that enhanced interaction would benefit the University and that they had a responsibility to contribute to the social experience of the scholars. However, only 17% thought there were sufficient opportunities for social interaction while 50% disagreed. Although not meant to be an exhaustive list of activities, respondents were asked to describe the type and frequency of the activities they might have engaged in with the scholars, ranging from dinner in their home to showing them around the city. Their responses indicate that social interaction with the scholars was rare. While they agree these activities would advance the University's internationalization goals, there is a gap between what they see as a benefit and what is currently being done to foster social interaction.

The university community had a number of suggestions to enhance the scholars' experience, including events that promote interaction with scholars from other countries, orientations, class guest lectures and more research support to better integrate the Chinese visiting scholars, more interaction with Canadian students and professors, attendance at arts and sports events, and exposure to other cultures in our community, including the Aboriginal culture. The major barriers to social interaction identified by the university community were lack of time, resources, awareness and communication, and university wide organized opportunities. Similar to the local community, they wanted to be made aware of the scholars and their interests. They also expressed concern about communicating with scholars where English is the second language. To overcome these barriers they suggested additional financial resources from the Dean's office, better coordination with the university's International Office, workload or academic recognition and more university-wide sponsored events.

Chinese Visiting Scholars

Only half of the sample agreed it was important to socialize outside of work, which may reflect the cultural perspective that they are here to work and not to play. Consistent with the university survey, the majority of the CVS did not interact in a social context on a regular basis. In fact, social contact with faculty, administration, and staff members was rare. Those who did, however, rated their experience positively. When asked what activities they would like to participate in, the top ranked activities included accompanying someone from the university on a trip out of or within the province, a tour around the city, and an invitation to a sporting event or to a family event such as a birthday or holiday celebration. Their responses are indicative of their desire to learn more about Canadian culture in the daily context of their lives. Nevertheless, much of their social contact has been among themselves or with the local Chinese community and

local churches. Most agreed that enhanced social interaction would benefit the relationship in the long run. When the scholars return home, their preferred mode of contact is through e-mail. They expressed a desire for continued involvement with the university's faculty members should a visit take place in their city in China.

Two focus groups comprised of scholars from various universities in China allowed the researchers to gain a more in-depth understanding of their needs for a more socially satisfying experience. A common theme in the focus group that reinforced the survey results was the high level of interest expressed in learning more about the culture of Canada. To develop this understanding, scholars had independently taken trips in the province and various places in Canada. Scholars had also visited local historic museums, the legislature, city hall, taken part in local festivals, engaged in church related events, participated in University events advertised on email, attended gallery lectures and met and talked with locals. The scholars indicated that some of their experiences had been arranged through such diverse sources as landlords, home-stay parents and professors. Interacting with them afforded the opportunity to discuss different points of view with respect to Aboriginal culture, universal health care and treatment of the disabled. The opportunities that contributed the most to a positive impression of their visit included traveling across Canada and being able to compare and contrast life in the East and West.

Participants identified a lack of transportation as a major barrier to learning more about Canadian culture. While the university's international office arranges transportation for weekly grocery shopping and some transfers to and from the airport, without a vehicle and limited public transportation, mobility is restricted. Focus group participants again emphasized their wish to communicate more frequently with visiting scholars from other countries, faculty and staff at the university, and members of the local community including farmers, employees, and government officials. Focus group participants suggested the International Office facilitate these connections. Cultural differences and lack of language proficiency were also identified as barriers that they felt could be overcome with more contact with local people.

Suggestions for enhancing the experience of future visiting scholars and removing these barriers included the International Office arranging industrial and commercial on-site visits or visits to farms and organizing recreational activities to cultivate cultural understanding and to improve research by focusing on commonly shared and current issues. They identified language as a cultural barrier (idioms and slang) and as a result wanted additional opportunities to speak to local people. The scholars also wanted to take part in more activities

after class with students and to participate in a more comprehensive orientation to the University that would allow them to better promote the host university to their home institution. In summary, the desire for more social and cultural opportunities was the single most important theme expressed in the focus group questions.

Participants in the focus groups identified a number of ways they could promote mobility/exchange when they returned home: encouraging students to study at the University, promoting further CVS exchanges and research collaboration, hosting national conferences, providing updates to their employers, and writing articles about the province. Some of the participants, who are ESL instructors in China, commented that after observing classes and teaching methods in the ESL program at the host university, they saw the value of being able to apply what they learned in their own classes.

In summary, mutual understanding was seen as being key to building a better relationship between the two countries. To achieve this, the scholars wanted their experience at the University to include more exposure to the diverse and multi-cultural lifestyle of Canadians; they also wanted to be able to share aspects of life in China.

Local Community

All participants in the community interviews indicated they saw value in interacting with the scholars for reasons related to building stronger economic ties with one of the biggest and fastest growing economies in the world. They recognized the need for the scholars to have a positive experience in Regina as they could potentially open political and economic doors for the province when they returned home. They saw enormous value in interacting with the scholars to talk about business and trade opportunities and to keep current about what is happening in China.

Value of a Mutually Beneficial Relationship

The two-sided dimension of the information exchange--the idea that both parties have something to learn from each other--was a theme throughout all the interviews. Learning from each other included the social and cultural aspects of communication. Chinese Visiting Scholars wanted more contact with Canadian students and professors in order to better understand Canadian culture and to promote understanding of Chinese culture. The importance of the mutual benefit of learning about each other's culture was a theme in the interviews. One scholar observed, "Local people need to have more information about China and not see us only as Tiananmen Square." Another scholar expressed interest in researching

the influence Chinese immigrants have had on Canadian culture. Some of the visiting scholars who were ESL instructors in China wanted to become more familiar with the campus so they could properly orient their students in China who were coming to the ESL program. They requested a more rigorous orientation to the university for themselves.

A number of local community respondents commented that they had not done as well as they would have liked to in building on the relationship that had been established by the University with China. They saw the need for better coordination in order to take that relationship to the next level. This included stronger research ties with respect to petroleum and technology research, opening up economic business offices in China, expanding trade relations, and recruiting entrepreneurial immigrants. With regard to the latter, the two local economic development organizations viewed marketing our province to the scholars as having the potential to encourage immigration, which is vital to economic growth.

University interest in engaging with their local communities has grown since the publication of Boyer's (1997) "Scholarship reconsidered: priorities of the professoriate" in which he offers an expanded definition of scholarship to address real societal needs. Service-learning, community based research, and collaborative partnerships on projects as diverse as health promotion, inner city revitalization and economic development are all examples of university community engagement. The idea that universities should be relevant to their communities and that these relationships can be mutually beneficial, are two underlying principles of university engagement. The notion "think globally and act locally" should have particular relevance for involving visiting scholars in the local community.

All participants interviewed offered a number of suggestions for activities that would be of mutual benefit to their organizations and to the visiting scholars. Suggestions for the scholars included attendance at scheduled events, information sharing with organizational representatives or their membership, orientations, tours, and experiential learning opportunities. The Chamber of Commerce, for example, offered to provide a calendar of events and speakers throughout the year that they could choose to participate in as well as opportunities to attend Chamber Board meetings. A number of government departments offered to provide orientation to how government works and its relationship to a variety of sectors. Local community respondents suggested the scholars meet with them or other organizational representatives to promote a better understanding of how our economy works, how the city or province is currently linked economically, politically, educationally and socially with China

and to hear from scholars what opportunities there are for the province of Saskatchewan in China.

One economic development agency suggested activities that would provide the scholars with a more hands on experience of the nature of the province's economy: industrial and commercial tours, on-site visits to various enterprises in the province and spending more time in their agency. Similarly, one department of a provincial ministry suggested interpretive cultural tours of the city and province to include a behind the scenes tour of the Provincial Museum, spending one or two weeks with the department to understand the province's social and political culture.

Need for a Sustainable Partnership

The nature of the activities that local community thought they could provide the scholars all spoke to the need for a more formalized program with the University. They thought the process should start with being made aware of the scholar's arrival and the scholar's professional backgrounds and interests, and identifying the fit between the scholars' interests and the activities offered by the community. For many of those interviewed, time and timing was a consideration. Some of those who offered to mentor and arrange visits are themselves busy professionals who often travel extensively. Knowing when the scholars were coming, their goals, interests, and areas of expertise was seen as necessary to ensure timely interaction. One respondent suggested that if the Province was to be successful in attracting and retaining international students and interacting meaningfully with visiting scholars with special expertise, funds specifically dedicated to international education were needed in addition to a policy and coordinated strategic approach to marketing what the province has to offer.

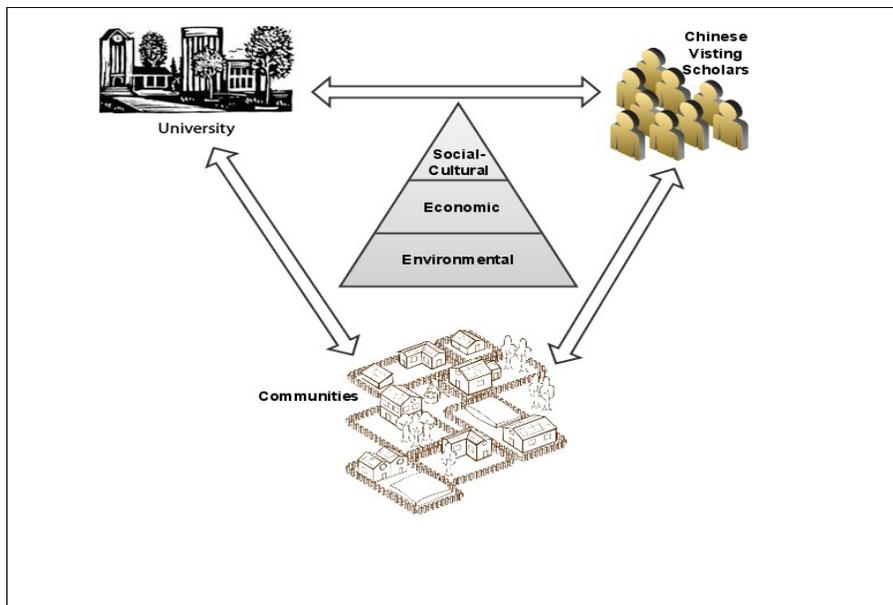
Local community respondents suggested that the university come to their organizations to talk about the scholars program and explore opportunities to work together. Again, there were comments related to the community needing to know what the University has already achieved in China and ways in which the local and provincial business community could build on that relationship.

The rich data informed us far beyond the areas of focus of the original research design. Various interesting themes emerged, the most important one being that actively supporting and engaging the visiting scholars in social and cultural activities on and off campus in addition to their scholarly and academic activities will benefit not only the scholars themselves, but also potentially have a long term impact on the relationship and mutual benefit of all parties involved. What led us to the second phase of our study was the overwhelming positive reaction from the community who saw enormous value in interacting with the

Chinese visiting scholars to gain insight into business, trade and cultural opportunities and to keep current about what was happening in China. This speaks to the need for the university to work more closely with government and business to better coordinate and formalize this interaction.

The strategic plan of the university where the study took place stresses the importance of social justice initiatives. In this climate concrete efforts need to be made to ensure that sharing between the visiting scholars and the university is conceived as being reciprocal and mutually beneficial. To this end, the second part of the research involved additional follow up and discussion with the local and university community. Based on this input, a number of activities were subsequently initiated. A model for a sustainable partnership is proposed. See Figure 1.

Figure 1. A Model for a Sustainable Partnership



The model incorporates four major elements. The first speaks to reciprocity; the idea that learning is mutual. The second element outlines the overlapping interests that are social cultural, economic and environmental. The third element of the proposed model links the campus, communities and countries. And finally,

the key of the model is to promote a cooperative and coordinated approach to ensure sustainability of the Chinese visiting scholar program.

Conclusion

Enhanced social interaction on the campus and in the community contribute to the quality and satisfaction of the visiting scholars' experience. Conventional thinking regards hosting visiting scholars as a one-sided opportunity with the benefits flowing to the scholars and their home country. In fact this study clearly identifies that visiting scholars can make meaningful contributions to the host as well as home institution, community and country at various levels. For the community, interaction with visiting scholars can help build stronger cultural, economic and political ties with one of the biggest and fastest growing economies in the world. There is the potential for knowledge transfer to businesses and other local organizations. The presence of visiting scholars can help to further internationalize the community by enhancing cross-cultural communication and understanding. The community also saw this as an opportunity for attracting well-qualified people.

This study has helped to realize the importance and potential for long-term relationship building through the deliberate effort to interact socially with the visiting scholars. The scholars can play a more significant role in student recruitment and retention at the university. Even though their initial connection is to the university, their influence and impact can be extended far beyond the campus to such things as assisting in the recruitment of skilled workers and immigrants to the host city and province, and building partnerships and bridges for business. They are our ambassadors for people of various cultures and countries. Although the investigation has only been with Chinese visiting scholars, we believe that the same may hold true with visiting scholars and students from other countries. This research can be used to better inform policy and practice in the area of cultural understanding, economic development and internationalization on the campus and beyond.

The implications for universities are numerous, as are the administrative challenges. Paying attention to the visiting scholars is about making sure we have a good relationship with our Chinese partners as well as government, business, and the local community. This requires strategic planning, a supportive infrastructure, faculty awareness and buy-in, and a commitment to internationalization in one's institution that is multi-faceted, coordinated and integrated with the community. Promoting university community engagement with these scholars can contribute to creating a learning community. Further research needs to be undertaken to examine the interaction of visiting scholars

and the community as an important element of a university's internationalization strategy. The current study has been limited to one particular group of visiting scholars focussing on one aspect of their experience-social interaction. The research needs to look beyond the social interaction to include a wider range of experience. Studies of this nature need to extend to visiting scholars and students from other countries and regions. Another meaningful comparative aspect would be to explore the attitudes and approaches of host institutions from different countries towards their visiting scholars.

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