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We Are More Than Your Paycheck: The Dehumanization of International Students in the United States

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The Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) announced on July 6, 2020, modifications to temporary exemptions for nonimmigrant students taking online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to this policy, F1/M1 students (and their dependents) at institutions that plan on operating entirely online during the fall semester were not going to be eligible to stay in the United States, and students at other institutions that offer in-person or hybrid classes were required to enroll in in-person credits (Department of Homeland Security, 2020). This announcement created chaos among the higher education system, but after over 200 universities filed or signed briefs backing one of at least eight lawsuits over this ruling, the federal government rescinded the policy on July 14.

As current and former international students in the United States, we feel relieved that over 1 million international students can resume their academic and life plans without unnecessary interruptions. However, the impact of the upheaval remains. The issuance of that guidance made us feel vulnerable, that our rights could be stripped, and that our struggles could be minimized or neglected. While reading the news, we were constantly thinking: Did the policy makers thought about whether it is possible, safe, and affordable for us to travel back home amidst the pandemic? Did they think about the apartment leases we have already signed? And more importantly, did they consider that some of us may not even have a place “back home” to return to? We questioned whether the country in which we have spent years studying, growing, playing, making friends, and raising children actually values our lives and sees us as human beings no different than those who hold a U.S. passport.

The rescission of this guidance does not mean that the battle is over. As we have witnessed for the past 4 years, the current Federal Administration has demonstrated an ongoing anti-immigrant and nationalistic stance through a series of attempts to

expel foreign citizens. First, the 2017 travel ban on people from Muslim-majority countries (Executive Order No. 13769, 2017) left many international students and faculty stranded outside the country. Later that year, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program was temporarily rescinded, affecting approximately 700,000 people (many of them students) who suddenly faced deportation. Then, in June 2020 a new proclamation banned the entry of Chinese students with military ties under the rationale of preventing espionage activities (Presidential Proclamation No. 10043, 2020). That same month, an extension suspended the entry of H1 and J visas in order to stop highly skilled migrants (including faculty and postdoctoral researchers) from “taking American jobs” (Presidential Proclamations No. 10014 & No. 10052, 2020). Over time, we are sadly getting used to being portrayed by the government as an enemy; it seems like we all are (at least potentially) criminals, terrorists, spies, or thieves of jobs and intellectual property.

This new affront was particularly hard because we realized throughout eight difficult days that we were being dehumanized in more than one way. We were held “hostages” (Blanco, 2020) and used as “political pawns” (Lee, 2020) by the federal government to impose its will. Disregarding health recommendations, the SEVP guidance was a political maneuver to force universities to open; to force them into a postpandemic back-to-normal that simply does not exist anymore. At the same time, those who were fighting with and for us sometimes used language that unconsciously embraced a nationalistic perspective; they defended our place and belonging mainly based on the economic contributions and valuable talent that we bring to this country (American Council on Education, 2020; NAFSA, 2020). Such language is often taken for granted, but for us, it can be hurtful. Although without harmful intentions, these arguments perpetuate the narrative that we are commodities (Yao & Viggiano, 2019) and omit the fact that every single student is a story, every single one of us has a life in this country, and that our lives are inherently connected with the life of others. Therefore, moving forward we hope that our institutions and other national organizations can question and reflect on their biases when fighting with and for us.

Nevertheless, the rapid, coordinated, and powerful mobilization led by scholars and higher education institutions gives us hope for a more inclusive future. Just as they did this time, we need our institutions not only to offer a pathway that protects us by complying with the government but to keep fighting the government’s policies that come from a xenophobic place and jeopardize our safety. We want to see more often “the greatest higher education system” coming together to exercise their collective agency to defend the ideals they have so heartfully written in their mission statements and strategic plans, proving that those are not empty words. Also, we want our universities to listen to us and actively assist us with the extra financial, academic, and psychological obstacles we constantly encounter, and thus affirm that we represent to them more than an influx of financial and intellectual resources, that we are more than just who pays for their paycheck. As Gary Rhoades, a professor in our department, put it: “These are our students. It is NOT about \$. It is NOT about ‘talent’” (Rhoades, 2020); this is the way we want to be seen. While there will always be room for improvement and growth, we see this incident as an inflection point that is positively shaping the way academics, institutions, and the larger communities perceive and value us.

Meanwhile, change must also come from within. We invite international students to realize our own worth and speak out for our rights. We too have been complicit in making this a business transaction. For far too long, we have tolerated and internalized the apparently “win-win” agreement where we accept and see no problem with being treated as cash-cows as long as we get to benefit from the perceived prestige of earning a U.S. degree. This is a hard dilemma and we need to reflect on it. There are indeed many issues of inequity in the higher education system of this country, and we cannot be silent observers and outsiders. Instead, we need to be more conscious about our own part in creating and perpetuating them, and act to fight against them. We are not only influenced by, but we also shape, the environment we live in. Let us work together to make things better; we owe it to ourselves if we are really invested in being part of our new communities. Regardless of what politicians say, a nationality or citizenship does not define us. In this day and age when transnational lives are normal, we have the ability and responsibility to be active citizens in many places at the same time.

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