

The Administration retreated on student visas, but the battle isn't over

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Confronted with a deadly virus, many American colleges and universities are choosing to protect their communities by teaching fall classes largely or entirely online. Last week, the federal government deliberately disrupted those plans by proposing a new rule that would have prevented potentially hundreds of thousands of foreign students from studying in the United States this fall if their classes were taught remotely.

Harvard's president, Larry Bacow, termed this move "cruel and reckless," a ploy to force institutions to open classes as if the pandemic had vanished. On Tuesday, responding to a joint lawsuit led by Harvard and my institution, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, as well as pressure from many other quarters, the government revoked the policy.

Yet the larger battle is far from over. This misguided policy was one of many signals that the administration wants foreign students to stay away — an attitude that reflects a stark misreading of our national interest.

In any long-running competition, no one understands your strengths better than your rivals. At a dinner I attended a few years back, Chinese tech leaders contended that China's most important economic advantage is scale: China's vast population and market offer a permanent leg up. But they also remarked on America's persistent advantage in scientific creativity.

What gives our country this advantage? Their explanation surprised me. Because the U.S. is heterogeneous, these leaders told me, it draws the best and brightest from all over the world to work and create together. This, they said, was much more difficult for China.

This astute observation perfectly captures why forcing foreign students to abandon their studies here would be disastrously self-defeating for America: Precisely at a time of sharp economic rivalries, we are systematically undermining the very strength our competitors envy most.

Why is foreign talent so important to the United States? For the same reason the Boston Red Sox don't limit themselves to players born in Boston: The larger the pool you draw from, the larger the supply of exceptional talent. Moreover, America gains immense creative advantage by educating top domestic students alongside top international students. By challenging, inspiring and stretching one another, they make one another better, just as star players raise a whole team's level of play.

Unfortunately, when you turn away great players, rival teams happily sign them. Other countries are working hard to attract students who have soured on the United States because of growing anti-immigrant hostility or bureaucratic roadblocks.

As a nation, when we turn our backs on talented foreign students, we not only lose all that they bring to our classrooms and laboratories, we also give up a strategic asset.

First, we lose the kind of personal drive that built this country: the life force of brilliant young people with the courage and ambition to leave everything familiar in search of a better future. What's more, most students who come here to earn a Ph.D. stay to build their families and careers, and often companies that create thousands of jobs. Many become citizens.

The latest data show, for example, that 83 percent of Ph.D. students from China, the kind of highly trained scientists and engineers who drive American innovation, were still in the United States five

years after completing their degrees.

The percentage would be higher if longstanding U.S. policies did not require many students to return home after finishing their education — a system as counterproductive as training a great player and then insisting that she go play for a rival team. Recently, the percentage of doctoral graduates remaining here has begun to decline, in part because our national message is that they are not welcome.

As some in Washington have sought to limit foreign students, especially those from China, that hostile message has grown louder.

Of course the United States must screen students seeking visas and keep out those with dubious backgrounds. But even the fiercest China hawks acknowledge that when foreign interests engage in espionage or intellectual theft, they seek to recruit senior scientists; only a small number of Chinese students have been implicated in such cases. The vast majority we should welcome, not discourage with the blunt hostility apparent in recent policies.

I believe profoundly that we must increase the number of Americans pursuing training in science and engineering. But we must also understand that America's strength in science and engineering is central to America's strength, period — and that a core element of that strength, for decades, has been our ability to lure the world's finest talent.

This country derives many intangible advantages from being a beacon of hope for people around the world; I first came to America in 1974 from Venezuela, where my parents finally settled as refugees from Hitler's Europe. I came to improve my own prospects through a graduate degree. But I found a culture of openness, boldness, ingenuity and meritocracy — a culture which taught me that in coming to America, I had truly come home.

Our competitors openly envy our capacity to welcome and adopt talent from everywhere. I fear lately that we will recognize this strategic U.S. strength only once it is lost.

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