Standing up to fear

In 2014, after years of planning, I finally got my visa to start my Ph.D. studies in the United States. I chose to come to this country—leaving behind my family and other loved ones in Iran—because I thought it would be the best way to grow as a scientist. I also felt I could be happy in a country built on a foundation of freedom, tolerance, and diversity. And that was pretty much the case for the first 2 years of graduate school, when I focused on my science, excited to be investing in my career and my personal growth. But the new U.S. president and the climate he has fostered have changed everything for me and people like me, and I need to speak out.

Casual interactions now make me feel unwelcome and unsafe. When the first attempted travel ban was announced, for example, a conversation with one of my former students—whom I had always had a good relationship with—turned to politics. I said that this country promises religious freedom for everyone. “Not for you, only for U.S. citizens,” he responded, adding that he supported the travel ban because he does not think that people with “different beliefs” should be allowed in this country. I was shocked at his ignorance of the law, and hurt that he seemed so eager to take away my rights. In a similar conversation about the effects of anti-immigrant sentiment, someone whom I had considered a friend told me bluntly that if I left an American would take my place—implying that this outcome would be preferable.

I never heard any comments like these before the election, but now they’re common. And I am not alone. I am in touch with international students across the country who are also facing this type of hostility in various forms and are afraid.

We are dealing with practical and logistical issues too. Even though the travel ban is currently blocked by the court, uncertainty about what will happen if we travel outside the United States is a major concern. Some of my Iranian friends who don’t have funding for the summer had planned to go back home; now they worry that they might not be readmitted to this country if they leave. In the long term, if I cannot even go abroad for a conference, I will effectively be a prisoner in the United States because I cannot risk losing my position. Moreover, most of my network will be in the United States, so as my career progresses, it will be hard to get a job elsewhere.

We need our institutions to support us as we confront these challenges. The best way to make this happen at my own university, I thought, would be to talk to our new interim president, whom I met at a reception. I worried that he would already know everything I wanted to tell him, making it a waste of time for both of us. But I believe that his job is to serve the students, so I felt it was important to reach out. It turns out that he was not aware of the deep fear among international students and our desperate need for support. He agreed to meet with me a few more times, and I was happy to have the opportunity to share my experience and the challenges that students like me are facing.

Raising my concerns did not produce the immediate, concrete results that I hoped for, such as a strong statement in support of international students. Even so, I’m happy that I took the initiative. Administrators need to know that the current uncertainty will harm their students. U.S. institutions will keep admitting international students, and it is crucial that they develop and implement plans to protect and nurture us.

I am considering leaving the United States to find a better place to build my life and career. But for as long as I’m here, I plan to stand up for immigrant scientists so that, hopefully soon, I can again spend my time thinking about scientific problems instead of my country of origin, my religion, or the color of my skin.

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Science 356 (6336), 458.
DOI: 10.1126/science.356.6336.458