EDITORIAL

Clarity on the crackdown

Harvey Lodish, Jianzhu Chen, and Phillip Sharp are professors in the Department of Biology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, USA. lodish@wi.mit.edu; jchen@mit.edu; sharppa@mit.edu

Less than a month after his inauguration, U.S. President Biden moved to reverse policies that have deterred foreign students and high-skilled workers from coming to the United States. This is good news. The exchange of culture and knowledge drives innovation, which in turn builds the nation's economy and competitiveness on a global scale. But some countries, especially China, continue to present a dilemma when it comes to national security. In trying to strike a balance between preserving a culture of openness and protecting U.S. research, missteps can occur—and that can be detrimental to U.S. science.

In 2018, the U.S. Department of Justice established its China Initiative to crack down on espionage. Numerous scientists and engineers, mostly Chinese and Chinese American, have been accused or convicted of a wide range of acts, such as hiding their ties to China. Certainly, guilty individuals have been identified. But what is concerning are the prosecutorial methods wielded under the China Initiative. Many outstanding scientists, mostly Chinese American, are being investigated for not properly disclosing certain associations with China. Even routine responsibilities, such as recommending students for jobs and awards, or serving as a reviewer on grants, are being portrayed as crimes. Some professors and many trainees have had to leave their positions or training after the termination of grants from U.S. agencies. The scale and obscurity of these matters threaten to damage research and innovation in the United States as Chinese and Chinese American scientists find themselves under constant suspicion for activities that are routine in academic collaborations.

> "Even routine responsibilities... are being portrayed as crimes."

If this clampdown is to continue, then more effective efforts must be made to distinguish normal, constructive international collaboration from genuine acts of espionage and financial malfeasance. At the same time, U.S. citizens who come under scrutiny must be granted the same rights under the law as their fellow Americans, regardless of their ethnicity or country of origin. Toward this end, more clarity is needed from the federal government and from university administrators. For example, federal guidelines and enforcement of policies requiring U.S. academic scientists to report interactions with foreign universities and organizations have changed substantially over the past few years. However, few universities have developed procedures to communicate these changes to their faculty. Nor have university grant administrative staff been trained to monitor and respond to the changes effectively. All federal agencies supporting unclassified research should present a single set of guidelines to the academic community, and host institutes should be audited to ensure that investigators have been informed of disclosure policies and best practices. If interactions with China are to be considered a special case, this should be made clear in federal guidelines as well, especially regarding collaborations and academic advising outside of federally supported programs.

It is particularly concerning that many scientists who are currently under investigation have been unfairly stripped of federal funding without due process. There should be a process wherein the actions of such individuals are considered relative to the guidelines of the federal agencies before termination of funding. The host university or institute could conduct an investigation in conjunction with the appropriate government agency, similar to the procedure in cases of scientific misconduct.

The scientific community, through organizations such as the U.S. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine and American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS, the publisher of *Science*), should also examine the history of engagement of U.S. scientists with international scientists and agencies, issuing reports on their societal benefits and risks. This study should include, but not be limited to, the current focus on China. To better monitor the impact of the China Initiative, the scientific community should keep a database of all scientists who have been, or are being, prosecuted or publicly investigated.

As the nation strives to reopen its doors to foreign students and scientists, it's important to remember that the strength of the U.S. scientific enterprise is its culture of academic openness to support discoveries that transform the country and the world. Let's not jeopardize that preeminence.

–Harvey Lodish, Jianzhu Chen, Phillip Sharp

10.1126/science.abh1627

Clarity on the crackdown

Harvey Lodish, Jianzhu Chen and Phillip Sharp

Science **371** (6532), 867.
DOI: 10.1126/science.abh1627