

Commentary

A Basis to Be Here: Stories from International Graduate Students in the United States

Mackenzie Lemieux,^{1,*} Juan Manuel Colazo,^{2,*} Tamina Kienka,^{3,*} and Ademi Zhakyp^{3,*}¹Washington University School of Medicine, St. Louis, MO, 63110, USA²Department of Biomedical Engineering, Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, Nashville, TN, 37232, USA³Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts, 02115, USA*Correspondence: l.mackenzie@wustl.edu (M.L.), juan.m.colazo@vanderbilt.edu (J.M.C.), tamina_kienka@hms.harvard.edu (T.K.), ademi.zhakyp@nu.edu.kz (A.Z.)<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.xcrm.2020.100100>

SUMMARY

Recent guidance from the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement drastically altered the lives of international students in America, especially those who are matriculating. This commentary describes how international students still face uncertainty concerning their visa statuses and their place in American society.

On July 6, 2020, the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) announced a new guidance for international students in the United States (USA). It proposed that non-immigrant students participating in academic studies (F1 visa holders) or vocational studies (M1 visa holders) must leave the USA if their course loads for the fall semester were entirely online.¹

The unexpected ICE directive confronted institutions with a difficult decision: either put the health and safety of an entire institution at risk in the middle of a pandemic, or lose international students. Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology filed a lawsuit against the Department of Homeland Security seeking a temporary injunction against the new guidelines.² More than 200 schools, as well as various big tech companies like Facebook and Google, supported the lawsuit.³

Over 1 million international students like us have come to call the USA home.⁴ For days we sat in an uncomfortable limbo wondering whether, as a result of the current US administration's actions, we would still be able to call this country home. Then, on July 14, 2020, the Trump administration faced Harvard and MIT in federal district court.⁵ Within minutes, the administration rescinded its directive.⁶ Most international students felt immediate relief. However, matriculating international students not yet in the USA are still banned from entering the

country if their courses remain entirely online.⁷

“If They’re Not Going to Be a Student or They’re Going to Be 100% Online, Then They Don’t Have a Basis to Be Here”

These are the words of Kenneth Cuccinelli, acting deputy secretary of the Department of Homeland Security.⁴ As international students, we already face pervasive uncertainty regarding our visa status. Being bombarded with further uncertainty regarding our immediate health and safety, as well as our future careers, opened our eyes to the volatility of our lives here in the USA under the current administration. As international graduate students in the USA, we deeply disagree with Cuccinelli's words. We do have a basis to be here.

Perspectives from International Graduate Students in the USA

The outcry observed by the institutional establishment echoes the immense importance of international students to research, science, and education in this country. Past international scholars have been Directors of the National Institute of Health, discoverers of novel cancer therapies, and even Nobel prize winners. The hard work of international scholars has effected immense, positive societal change in the USA. Detering international scholars from studying in the USA hurts us all. Read our stories and support our goals to better a society to which we all belong.

Tamina Kienka: Third-Year MD-PhD Student at Harvard Medical School

As an international student on an F-1 visa, you learn the rules quickly: do not leave the country without your form I-20 signed by your academic institution, apply for your temporary work permit (OPT) months before you need it to avoid unexpected delays, and many others. You learn the rules because your immigration status depends on it.

I grew up in Nigeria and dreamed of coming to the USA to pursue higher education. My family had moderate means and understood my chances were slim. However, my father had a plan. When I was 4 years old, my father gave me my first tennis racket. He would lead me to 6 a.m. practices before school and again later in the day. He turned the courts into a classroom and instilled in me the principles he held close growing up: discipline, focus, and perseverance. Soon, I was invited to join the Nigerian junior national team and represented my country in many parts of Africa. Then came the opportunity I had been working to create. At 16 years old, I boarded a plane headed for the USA. I had been offered full academic and athletic scholarships from North Carolina Central University to join its Division I tennis team.

I have been fortunate to say the least. I completed my undergraduate education at North Carolina Central University and spent the following 2 years at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) engaging in cancer immunology research.



I am now a third-year student at the Harvard Medical School (HMS)/MIT combined MD-PhD program.

For many international students like me, the COVID-19 pandemic has complicated our education. In March, I paused my clinical clerkships to “shelter in place” like many others around the country. Given that an MD-PhD typically takes 8 years to complete, this added great uncertainty and anxiety over the trajectory of my future. Then, an already difficult situation was challenged by the greatest threat of all: being forced to leave the country at a moment’s notice. I have always understood that my immigration is tenuous, but I believed that as long as I stayed out of trouble, paid my taxes, and positively contributed to my community, I would remain unscathed. The ICE announcement pulled the rug from under me and affirmed my deepest worries. You may dedicate your time to supporting and enriching a nation, but that support may not be returned. What happens when your contributions are no longer valued or respected?

During my time at Harvard, I have supported the important work of the Family Van at HMS, an organization that works to increase access to healthcare and improve the health of residents in Boston’s most underserved communities. In addition, through the Harvard chapter of the Student National Medical Association, I have worked to help organize workshops and information sessions for underrepresented minority students looking to pursue graduate degrees in the biomedical sciences and gain entry into medical programs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I have volunteered with the Cambridge Health Alliance Mobile Market, helping package and distribute food to those who need it in this difficult time. I have also assisted in a COVID-19 serology study run by a group of researchers at Harvard and the Broad Institute to contribute to both our current understanding of the pandemic and to policy decisions affecting the health and lives of us all.

Over the past 8 years I have learned here, worked here, found a second family, and grown to love this country. I have broken no laws and committed no crimes. Yet, as we have seen, international students like me may be asked to leave the

country or risk deportation, jeopardizing the future we have worked hard to create.

My long-term goal is to be a physician-scientist, using my MD-PhD training synergistically to improve the health outcomes of my patients through care delivery and research. *That is my basis to be here.*

Ademi Zhakyp: First year PhD Student at Harvard Medical School

During my undergraduate years at Nazarbayev University, Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan, I developed a profound interest in biomedical research. My belief that my work will make a valuable contribution to the international scientific community empowered me to spend all of my spare time in the lab.

I took a gap year after my junior year of college to both train as an intern and contribute to research in the USA at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. The Boston community was the most vibrant research community I had ever been a part of, so I applied for a PhD at Harvard Medical School (HMS). When I got accepted to the PhD program in Immunology at HMS, I felt a few steps closer to my dream. I was going to be a researcher. However, the COVID-19 pandemic put my PhD experience into question. How am I going to obtain F-1 status before classes start? How am I going to travel to Boston without risking my and others’ health and safety? Will laboratories still be open to new PhD students?

Just days before the ICE immigration rule, HMS opted to make the Fall 2020 semester online, stating that international students could still complete their coursework online and travel to Boston as soon as the US Embassies reopened. The recent guidance issued by ICE added a new layer of difficulty for international PhD students.

As a matriculating student, I am now not allowed to enter the USA for the entire fall semester. I may not be able to finish the required number of lab rotations necessary to identify my PhD lab and advisor by the required date. Further, the time difference between Nur-Sultan and Boston is 10 hours. The online curriculum for the fall contains both self-paced components and professor guided lectures. While I can do self-paced work at my convenience, participating in scheduled events will be

difficult because I will need to attend class late into the night. I wish I could at least travel to the USA during the Fall because it is difficult to participate in lectures at 3 a.m. But with the current ruling, I am forced to stay in Nur-Sultan or risk losing my visa privileges altogether.

I should feel happy in these days before the start of my higher education. Instead, I feel excluded from the community I am a part of. Because the regulation still applies to new incoming students, I have to stay outside of the USA. Even though I believe that staying in my home country, for now, is wise for the safety of myself and others, I hope that the American government will understand how much international students contribute before deciding to prohibit us from entering the USA. As an international student, my goal is not just to earn one more degree. I want to invest my knowledge and unique experience to make a positive change both in science and in the community I belong to.

During my undergraduate years, I was part of the Nazarbayev University Green Society student club that aspires to promote an environmentally friendly lifestyle. We organized lectures or workshops on plastic waste sorting and how to minimize one’s ecological footprint. I am eager to share my experience with the Harvard community and make Boston an even greener place. My long-term goal is to open an immunology laboratory with the primary goal of helping cancer patients. *That is my basis to be here.*

Juan Colazo: Fourth Year MD-PhD Student at Vanderbilt University

My father was an international student in the late 1990s and early 2000s. He moved to Canada from Argentina and lived by himself for a few months, before my mother and sister and I were approved to make the nearly 7000-mile journey. Little did we know this “temporary” move would change the trajectory of our lives forever.

Originally, my father’s plan was to become a well-trained animal scientist abroad and head back to Argentina for work. Around the time he completed his master’s degree, the 2001/2002 Argentine crisis was unraveling, and my parents felt it was unsafe to return. Riots occurred in the streets, banks were shut down, and jobs were few and far between. My

father's institution graciously approved his request to extend his international status into a PhD. As a family, we are eternally grateful for the opportunities provided to international students: my father finished his PhD and has worked as an animal scientist in Canada ever since.

In 2017, I had to make a big decision: either stay in Canada for medical school or take a risk and follow in my father's footsteps as an international student. So, why the latter? Was my decision persuaded by having rose-colored glasses from my father's prior experiences? Was it because of my belief that medical and scientific education in the USA is some of, if not the, best in the world? Probably both.

Since being here, the additional barriers faced by international students have become apparent. For example, I received my access card to work in the Veterans Affairs (VA) hospital almost 6 months after my peers and only after filling out a form containing every single piece of my personal information since birth. I've also been ineligible for most, if not close to all, graduate student fellowships. After standing face-to-face with potential deportation and with the risk still lingering, I am scared to travel home; as a result, I've only been able to see my recently born niece through a video screen. It will probably be this way for quite some time.

Science and medicine, although wonderful professions, are notoriously difficult and mentally challenging, often requiring 100% commitment. With ICE's announcement coming "out of the blue," I found it increasingly difficult to focus on my studies and experiments. I even felt like I lost some of the fulfillment in pursuing this career path as I now know that I need to be ready and responsive to any sudden and ill-advised regulations. Since being in this country, I feel like I am constantly questioning my perceived value to American society, and I sometimes ask myself, "Do I belong here?"

Since moving to Nashville, Tennessee, from Canada in 2017, I have taken care of and translated for Spanish-speaking patients at Vanderbilt's student-run Shade Tree Clinic for the uninsured and underserved community of Nashville. I helped organize the 2018 Southeastern Medical Scientist Symposium and have

participated in leadership roles within my MD-PhD program. I have coached soccer for the Nashville Youth Soccer Association, and I participate yearly in Vanderbilt's "Mini-MSTP," teaching elementary and middle schoolers about science and medicine. I mentor international pre-med applicants through the organization F-1 Doctors as well as domestic pre-med applicants. During the current COVID-19 crisis, I have volunteered to answer citizen calls for the Tennessee Department of Health, participated in the direct care of Shade Tree patients utilizing telehealth, and delivered food with the Second Harvest Food Bank of Middle Tennessee.

My long-term goal is to be a scientist in the regenerative medicine, tissue engineering, and drug delivery fields while taking care of the Hispanic community as a physician. *That is my basis to be here.*

Mackenzie Lemieux: First Year MD-PhD Student at Washington University in St. Louis

I was born in Toronto, Canada. My childhood dream was to attend college in the USA; I wanted to compete as a long-distance runner in the NCAA and learn alongside the best students and athletes in the world. Knowing how insurmountable it would be to make running my ticket to the USA, I trained and studied as hard as my mind and body would allow. I matriculated at Cornell University, and competed on the Division I track and cross-country teams. I was also able to conduct neuroscience research. With incredible opportunities, endless resources, and leaders in scientific innovation just steps away, I quickly realized that I would do whatever it took to pursue an MD-PhD in the USA.

I was told that my chances of acceptance were slim. Many MD-PhD programs do not even let international students apply. After talking to my international peers, I discovered that deterring international students from applying to graduate programs was commonplace at most American colleges. Frustrated yet determined, I applied to all 25 institutions that claimed to accept international students. I am now tremendously excited to be starting my first year as an MD-PhD student at Washington University in St. Louis.

Just one month before moving to St. Louis, I was shocked by the ICE guidance.

Should I try to back out of my apartment lease in St. Louis? Do I have to fly home to Toronto? The sad reality was that if I had to go home, so would my future MD-PhD classmates who were international students from Spain, Honduras, China, Vietnam, and Lebanon. It felt extremely unfair that the chance to bond with our class and explore research and clinical opportunities in St. Louis was being ripped away.

I immediately began crafting a solution. We needed to have at least one in-person class. Since I was already spearheading the creation of a journal club for the incoming MD-PhD class, titled "Social Justice in Medicine and Science," I worked with my classmates to expedite the planning and proposed the journal club as an in-person, one-credit class. We could effectively protect our international students while simultaneously educating each other on racism, violence, and injustice in the USA. Though almost half of my MD-PhD class is international, we are dedicated to making the USA better by equipping ourselves with the skills to become better allies and advocates for our patients and our communities.

For two years prior to beginning my MD-PhD, I was a research technician in a neuroscience lab at both the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the Salk Institute for Biological Studies. While at MIT, I founded a diversity seminar series called "SAID in STEM" to highlight the achievements of women in science and medicine and educate the MIT community on gender discrimination and harassment. At the Salk, I taught my community how to create and edit Wikipedia pages for women in STEM to address the severe underrepresentation of women and minorities on Wikipedia. I organized the first ever Wikipedia Edit-a-Thon at Salk and chaired the International Women's Day Wikipedia Edit-a-Thon at the University of California, San Diego. By supporting women in my community and amplifying their voices, I hope to make academia a more equitable and welcoming place.

I plan to continue to impact my community one day as a physician-scientist. My goal is to lead a neuroimmunology laboratory and develop novel immunotherapies to treat psychiatric and

neurodegenerative diseases in my patients. *That is my basis to be here.*

Our Basis to Be Here

Our stories only partially encapsulate our basis to be here in the USA. There are approximately one million more stories like the ones above: just ask one of the international students in your research institute, class, or lab. Allowing us to better our communities and supporting our pursuit of scientific and medical breakthroughs will result in a stronger and healthier USA. The opportunity to study in the USA made our goals to become both physicians and scientists possible. We want to give back. Like the many international students, scientists, and physicians before us, we are determined to make our society a better place. At least give us a shot.

REFERENCES

1. Student Exchange and Visitor Program (2020). SEVP modifies temporary exemptions for nonimmigrant students taking online courses during fall 2020 semester. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement: News Releases, <https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/sevp-modifies-temporary-exemptions-nonimmigrant-students-taking-online-courses-during>.
2. Hartocollis, A., and Jordan, M. (2020). Harvard and M.I.T. sue to stop Trump visa rules for foreign students. The New York Times, July 8, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/us/harvard-mit-trump-ice-students.html>.
3. Kraus, R. (2020). Google, Facebook, other big tech companies back lawsuit against ICE. Mashable, <https://mashable.com/article/google-facebook-ice-international-students-lawsuit>.
4. McGee, L., Pettersson, H., and Greene, R.A. (2020). There are more than 1 million international students in the US. Here's where they're from. CNN, July 7, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/07/world/us-international-students-where-from-intl-gbr/index.html>.
5. Fernandes, D. (2020). Trump administration drops plan to bar international students from US. The Boston Globe, July 14, 2020. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/07/14/metro/harvard-mit-argue-foreign-student-ban-will-harm-universities-public-health>.
6. Shevin, Z., and Rahin, R. (2020). ICE rescinds policy barring international students with online course loads following Harvard, MIT's lawsuit. The Daily Princetonian, July 14, 2020. <https://www.dailyprincetonian.com/article/2020/07/princeton-department-of-homeland-security-immigration-amicus-brief-june-6-rescind>.
7. Kemsley, J. (2020). New international students cannot enter US for online-only programs. Chemical and Engineering News, <https://cen.acs.org/education/New-international-students-cannot-enter/98/i30>.