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GOVERNMENT

‘It Would Have Been Catastrophic’: Trump Administration Suggested, Then Shelved, a Plan to Bar All Chinese Students

By Karin Fischer | OCTOBER 02, 2018

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Jabin Botsford, The Washington Post via Getty Images

According to the *Financial Times*, Stephen Miller, a senior adviser to President Trump, pushed the president to bar Chinese students from studying at American universities.

Reports that the Trump administration had considered, but not carried out, a ban on visas to all Chinese students — far and away the largest group of international students in the United States — sent ripples of alarm across American campuses on Tuesday.

Even as educators expressed relief that President Trump had been dissuaded from acting on the visa proposal, they worried it could be a prelude to future policies that could undermine international enrollments or, more broadly, higher education’s global outreach. And they expressed concern that news that such a plan was

even debated could poison perceptions abroad about America’s openness to foreign students.

According to the *Financial Times*, the issue came to a head in an Oval Office meeting this spring when immigration hardliners, led by Stephen Miller, a White House aide, pressed for a blanket prohibition on Chinese citizens studying in the United States. While Miller cited the national-security vulnerabilities of universities, the plan was ultimately shot down because of its economic and diplomatic impact, the paper reported.

“I can’t express more strongly,” says Rahul Choudaha, executive vice president for global engagement and research at StudyPortals, a company that recruits international students online, “if this had taken effect, it would have been catastrophic for U.S. higher education.”

Already, on the Chinese social-media platform WeChat, students have been slamming the aborted proposal. “America game over,” one user wrote. “Canada has great schools,” another added.

While the administration’s January 2017 executive order barring travelers, including students, from a half dozen predominantly Muslim countries drew headlines and sparked protests nationwide, the restrictions on Chinese students, if enacted, could arguably have proved more consequential for American colleges. While the initial travel ban — a final version was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in June — would have affected fewer than 2 percent of the 1.1 million students from overseas, one in three international students at American colleges is Chinese. In fact, China sends more students to the United States than the other top-five sending countries combined.

In making his case, Miller suggested that the proposal could hurt elite universities like Harvard and Princeton that had been critical of the president. But a move to block all Chinese student visas would affect colleges across the country — elite and open access, public and private, large and small — all of which have taken part in the China-student boom of the last decade. As more institutions emphasize the importance of giving students a global experience, bringing students from overseas has been a critical path to internationalization.

During the Oval Office debate, Terry Branstad, the U.S. ambassador to China, made the point that Chinese enrollment was widespread, not merely confined to Ivy League institutions, according to the *Financial Times*.

Still, if any type of college would be especially vulnerable to a sudden decline in Chinese enrollments, it is large public research universities. Harvard, for instance, has just a few dozen Chinese undergraduates. At Stony Brook University, in New York, by contrast, 55 percent of the 5,000 international students are from China.

“Wow,” says Jun Liu, vice provost for global affairs at Stony Brook, who stepped off a plane from Shanghai to news of the proposed ban. “That would have been a big hit.”

For many public institutions, the uptick in interest from China was a godsend, coming just as the recession decimated state budgets and taxpayer support for higher education. A number of institutions deliberately sought to recruit from abroad as a way to plug budgetary holes and subsidize financial aid for needy American students.

A decade on, state appropriations to higher education have returned to pre-recessionary levels in just a half-dozen states, meaning that tuition from Chinese and other international students remains a critical source of revenue for many institutions. Over all, Nafsa: Association of International Educators estimates that Chinese students contribute \$12 billion annually to the American economy in tuition, living expenses, and spin-off jobs.

But the impact of Chinese students cannot be measured strictly in dollars and cents. International students, and Chinese students in particular, are a critical source of academic and research talent. Nearly 30 percent of doctoral degrees awarded by American colleges go to international students; in physics, a quarter of doctorates go to Chinese students alone, according to figures from the National Science Foundation.

Many of those students remain in the United States for their careers, both inside and out of academe. Jeet Joshee, associate vice president for international programs at California State University at Long Beach, says 70 percent of the applicants for a recent opening in the engineering department had come to the United States as international students. Cutting off that pipeline could have long-lasting ramifications, he says: “Mind-boggling.”

University officials like Joshee had already begun to worry about a hit to international enrollments in the wake of the travel ban. Although the measure had a direct impact on a small number of foreign students, it was part of a larger “Trump effect,” the president’s nationalistic, antiforeigner rhetoric made manifest.

Up to this point, however, Chinese students had seemed largely immune to the Trump effect. Chinese enrollments continued to rise last year, even in the wake of the travel ban.

Could that change with the news of the proposed prohibition on Chinese visas, even if it wasn’t put in place? Jiang Xueqin, an educational consultant in China, thinks it might.

For Chinese parents, sending their children to study in America is a “lifelong commitment,” he says, one that takes a great financial investment and long-term planning. In China, many students opt out of the government, or gao kao, curriculum in order to prepare to study abroad in college. Parents might not want to take that risk if U.S.-government policy could make it more difficult, or even impossible, to earn an American degree. Or they could choose to send their children to another country, like Canada, that is perceived as more hospitable. “For sure,” Jiang says, “a lot of Chinese parents are freaking out.”

And though the plan to bar Chinese visas was shelved, the Trump administration did move ahead with other, less far-reaching restrictions on Chinese students, limiting the length of visas for students and scholars studying and conducting research in certain sensitive fields. This reflects a drumbeat of warnings from administration officials, as well as members of Congress, that colleges could be vulnerable to Chinese espionage and theft of intellectual property.

Moratorium on Visas?

Terry W. Hartle, senior vice president for government and public affairs at the American Council on Education, said higher-education leaders are aware of these worries. Just a few weeks ago, he says, a group of 20 college presidents met with Federal Bureau of Investigation officials at the agency's Washington headquarters to discuss "legitimate concerns" government officials may have about campus security weaknesses.

"Still," Hartle added of the visa proposal, "that doesn't mean you throw the baby out with the bathwater. It's alarming that an idea that radical came out in the Oval Office — and reassuring that reasonable heads prevailed."

The *Financial Times* piece, however, raised the possibility that the Trump administration could revisit the idea of a moratorium on Chinese student visas, "particularly as he takes an increasingly tough line on China." In addition to security concerns, the president has been critical of the American trade deficit with China.

Jill Welch, deputy executive director for public policy for Nafsa, the international-education group, says her members will continue to lobby lawmakers about the value of international education and international students, as well as for changes in immigration and visa policy.

"It's unfortunate to stick education in the mix of the trade war or other disagreements our governments have," she says. "Education is supposed to be a tool to create understanding."

While the proposal was largely couched in national security and trade terms, Benjamin Waxman, chief executive of Intead, a global education-marketing firm, says he also was disquieted by the argument made by Stephen Miller, the policy aide, that the policy "would hurt elite universities whose staff and students have been highly critical of Mr. Trump."

"You're talking about harming a multibillion-dollar industry in the U.S. because some are vocal about opposition to your policies?" Waxman says.

Karin Fischer writes about international education, colleges and the economy, and other issues. She's on Twitter @karinfischer, and her email address is karin.fischer@chronicle.com.

