



# Retaining international students in northeast Ohio: Opportunities and challenges in the ‘age of Trump’

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## ABSTRACT

Donald Trump's recent restrictive migration regime – symbolized by border walls, Travel Bans, and Hire American policies – presents new concerns for student migrants, the practitioners who advise them, and the institutions that rely on their tuition fees. But a competing migration regime exists at the subnational scale that frames international students, particularly those who study in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) and business fields as ideal future citizens. Recent geographical scholarship on the local as a site of contested immigration politics suggests a need to understand student migrants as also enmeshed in the spatial politics of the states and cities in which they reside, as well as the institutions they attend. This article is concerned with international student mobility in the ‘age of Trump,’ with a focus on the local geographies of exclusion and inclusion this age both instigates and contests. The study findings are based on eighteen in-depth interviews conducted with recent graduates of six northeast-Ohio colleges and universities. Their experiences demonstrate the emergence of new and differentiated everyday landscapes of exclusion, which introduce new obstacles for international students and the local as a scale of inclusionary immigration politics.

## 1. Introduction

As the largest receiver of international students worldwide, shifts in United States visa policies have substantial domestic and global implications for international student mobility. Donald Trump's recent restrictive migration regime – symbolized by border walls, Travel Bans, and Hire American policies – presents new concerns for student migrants, the practitioners who advise them, and the institutions that rely on their tuition fees (Moser et al., 2017; NAFSA, 2018; Saul, 2018). International students in the US now live in a “precarious world” in which no visa is a certainty and globalization is positioned as an incipient threat to national identity (Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood, 2017). This world cannot be taken for “business as usual,” but reflects a broader emergence of “extreme and extremist geographies” of xenophobia (Scott, 2017:102). Scholars have yet to examine how international students are navigating this regime.

This article is concerned with international student mobility in the ‘age of Trump,’ with a focus on the local geographies of exclusion and inclusion this age both instigates and contests. A competing migration regime exists at the subnational scale that frames international students, particularly those who study in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) and business fields as ideal future citizens. This regime aims to “work within” current US immigration law by

encouraging international students to move across “stepping stones” from education to migration (Khalid, 2017; Redden, 2014; Robertson, 2013). US-educated international students may extend their visas to work for up to three years after graduation through the Optional Practical Training (OPT) period (USCIS, 2017); and, if students can find an employee sponsor, they may also seek specialty occupation (H-1B) visas that may later convert to a green card (Ruiz, 2014, 2017). Recent projects like Michigan's Global Talent Retention Initiative and Ohio's Global Reach to Engage Academic Talent (GREAT) are part of emerging regional “development-oriented inclusionary” agenda that promote immigration as the key to post-industrial rebirth (Filomeno, 2015; Pottie-Sherman, 2018). The Midwest is thus a key region for understanding how this contradictory coding of migration at the federal and state level shapes student migrants' dreams and realities.

Here, I frame this issue within three recent developments in geography. First, challenging portrayals of international students as global elites, geographers have emphasized the role of the state in shaping students' aspirations and abilities to migrate (Bauder, 2015; Mavroudi and Warren 2013). Visas and naturalization channels are highly stratified “materials of mobility” (Szewczyk, 2016:373; Waters, 2006). While the movements of international students to the US have long been circumscribed in the name of securitization (Ewers and Lewis, 2008) recent work in geography underscores the need to interrogate

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new "racist-spatial dynamics" of immigration (Ehrkamp, 2017:1). The January 2017 Travel Ban reflected the "first line of an attack orchestrated by the Trump administration on racialized migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees" (Moser et al., 2017:176). Trump's Buy American, and Hire American Executive Order appeals to nativist anxieties about skilled migrants as job stealers. These developments allude to the far-reaching consequences for student migrants engendered by this extreme politics of exclusion.

Second, while the local is an increasingly active site of immigration politics in the US, states, counties, and cities are unevenly involved in the domains of citizenship and foreign policy (Steil and Ridgley, 2012; Varsanyi, 2010; and Walker and Leitner, 2011). Geographers link this variegated landscape of pro- and anti-immigrant initiatives to the interplay of the "politics of scale, networking, and place" (Walker, 2015:486) highlighting the regional character of local activism (Pottie-Sherman, 2018). Local initiatives to retain international students have emerged in jurisdictions downscaled by globalization (Filomeno, 2015; Glick Schiller and Caglar, 2010) where international students are perceived as agents of place promotion and economic development (Lane et al., 2014; Owens et al., 2011). This scholarship suggests a need to understand student migrants in the age of Trump as also enmeshed in multiple kinds of spatial politics of the states and cities in which they reside, as well as the institutions they attend.

Third, despite the best efforts of states – and increasingly the sub-national scale – to manage migration through neatly defined categories (i.e. study or work, stay or return) migration is a process formed across multiple "social and material assemblages" (Collins, 2018:968; Moskal, 2017; Waters, 2017; Wu and Wilkes, 2017). International students' decisions cannot be reduced to rational, individual economic calculations occurring linearly and at discrete moments, but instead, their desires for movement unfold unpredictably over complex "spatial and temporal horizons" (Collins, 2018:969; van Liempt, 2011). Collins' conceptualization of migration implies that mobility regimes such as Ohio's GREAT or the Trump administrations' are constituted by assemblages of actors, ideas, and materials and variously introduce or block migrant trajectories. Importantly, however, they represent only single dimensions of migration as a process and do not determine the desires which ultimately direct global movement.

Taken together, these insights underscore the need to "think beyond international student as a category" by acknowledging the heterogeneity of this community (Madge et al., 2015:681) and by disentangling the particularity of the US context. In doing so, I ask: (1) what kinds of blockages has the Trump immigration agenda introduced for international students at the intersection of education and migration? and (2) How has this macro-level politics of blockage shaped the migration aspirations, ability, and everyday lives of recent graduates?

To address these questions, I conducted eighteen in-depth interviews with recent graduates of six colleges and universities in northeast Ohio who had found (or were seeking to) work in the area after graduation through Optional Practical Training (OPT) or H-1B visa sponsorship. The students included in this study represent the first cohort of students to graduate during the Trump Presidency and these interviews examined the paths taken by international students who wish to remain in the US after graduating, and the impact of restrictive federal immigration policy changes on this transition. Their experiences demonstrate the emergence of new and differentiated everyday landscapes of exclusion, which introduce new obstacles for international students and the local as a scale of inclusionary immigration politics.

## 2. Conceptualizing international student mobility in the age of Trump

The age of Trump describes the nativist, anti-globalist, and racist policies and discourses enacted and promoted since the inauguration of Donald Trump as US President in January of 2017. This regime has had immediate and profound consequences for higher education and

academic mobility, although it is crucial to note that violent borders predate this administration (Mainwaring and Silverman, 2017; Moser et al., 2017). The recent travel bans – directed at Muslim-majority countries – play into longstanding Islamophobia about Muslim international students as threats to national security (Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood, 2017). Travel Ban 3.0, entitled "Enhancing Vetting Capabilities and Processes for Detecting Attempted Entry into the United States by Terrorists or Other Public Safety Threats," upheld by the Supreme Court, now restricts nationals from seven countries: Iran, Libya, North Korea, Somalia, Syria, Venezuela, and Yemen. While most student visas are exempted from the current ban, students and researchers face heightened scrutiny and substantial "insecurity about being banned suddenly with no recourse" (Moser et al., 2017:177).

More broadly, these policies have had consequences beyond the passports targeted by the ban including unpredictability at the border, feeling unwelcome in the US, concerns for physical safety on campus, and contracting post-graduation work opportunities (Farrugia and Andrejko, 2017:2). Many international students have invested substantial resources into US higher education with the expectation that they will be able to work temporarily in the US when they finish their studies (Farrugia, 2016). But the Trump administration has also called these opportunities into question (Mayberry, 2009; Wadman and Stone, 2017). Trump's "Buy American, and Hire American," Executive Order, issued in April of 2017, foreshadowed an overhaul of the H-1B specialty visa lottery, stipulating that the executive branch would "rigorously enforce and administer the laws governing entry into the United States of workers from abroad," insofar as they threaten the "economic interests" of American workers (Trump, 2017).

Early analyses of enrollment data reveal no one national trend, however, and suggest the age of Trump is having an uneven impact on US higher education, most pronounced at smaller, less research-intensive institutions (i.e. R2 and R3 schools), at the Master's level, and in the South and Midwest (Farrugia and Andrejko, 2017). Enrollment provides a limited indicator of impact, however, given the complexity of global trends in higher education (Thomas and Inkpen, 2017). To better conceptualize the impact of Trump's politics of xenophobia on international student mobility, in the remainder of this section, I propose a conceptual framework that draws insights from scholarship on (1) the state in international student mobility; (2) the local as a site of contested immigration politics; and (3) migrant aspirations, desires, and abilities.

### 2.1. The state in international student mobility

One starting point for understanding Trump's impact on international students concerns the profound role of the state in mobilizing and immobilizing students (Bauder, 2015; Collins et al., 2017; Mavroudi and Warren, 2013; Robertson, 2011; Robertson and Runganaikaloo, 2014). International students in the US have long had to navigate the paradoxical policy agendas of neoliberalism in higher education and the securitization of migration (Côté-Boucher, 2010; Ewers and Lewis, 2008; King and Raghuram, 2013; Pottie-Sherman, 2013; Urias and Camp Yeakey, 2009). As Ewers and Lewis (2008) note, on one hand, policymakers frame international students through "axes of risk," posing a threat to national security, identity, and domestic wages, and exploit political profits associated with these narratives. On the other hand, policymakers also view declining international student enrollment and the US' inability to retain trained in America international graduates as a threat to the US economy (Sa and Sabzalieva, 2017).<sup>1</sup> An

<sup>1</sup> Proposed legislation in this area includes the Stopping Trained in America PhDs from Leaving the Economy (STAPLE) Act of 2009, which would provide green cards to doctoral graduates in STEM fields, and the 2012 STEM Jobs Act, which proposed to create 55,000 visas for graduates of particular universities. As it stands, students seeking F-1 study visas must demonstrate "non-immigrant

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