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Dear SEM

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Dear SEM International Students,

After floating, diving, and sometimes almost drowning in the sea called "how to stay in this country" as an international student for years, I am going back home. In the past two years, I realized that staying in the US has become the opposite of "staying safe and healthy," a phrase that was everywhere during the pandemic. It once taught me to unlearn the mentality of stay productive, stay competitive in academia and reminded me that a person's health and safety can be the top priority. As one of the earliest lessons I learned in this country, this lesson now has encouraged me to leave.

Be one of them! Be one of them! For a long time, we've been instilled with the idea that blending in and demonstrating how American we can be equates to how successful we can become. These voices drain us until we dissolve into the background, disappear, just remain silent. Our cultures, our countries, the prime version of us at home, have been shrunk into things that exist only in our bedrooms, our playlists, our dishes, and our screens; yes, of course, many of us unleash them for our writing (who doesn't like our autoethnography?), then shove them back to live an "American" life. While sometimes this seems to work—at least on our belief in the elusive American dream, in cases when it's still achievable—it also leaves us like donkeys, chasing the unreachable carrot dangling in front of us in a never-ending loop.

Over the past year, our carrot has become a bitter melon. A series of changes in immigration laws has significantly impacted the lives of international students. Figuring out how these changes would affect our lives and career goals, whether immediate or long-term, has drastically disrupted our focus on intellectual pursuits as well as academic tasks and responsibilities. Indeed, many of these changes do not directly place us in devastating situations. Those adjustments at the beginning seem subtle; carrying my passport with me all the time does not seem particularly burdensome or exhausting compared to the experiences of people whose lives have been directly threatened or placed in danger.

In some of my friends' cases, the visa process has taken much longer than before, disrupting their academic schedules, but their visas were ultimately still issued. These inconveniences often seem resolvable in the end, or perhaps too minor to address or complain about. Yet they act like a slow lick, gradually eroding our patience, our trust in this country, and our sense of safety—the confidence that we, as human beings, will not be treated as aliens. In such a situation, staying healthy, both physically and mentally, seems impossible. Especially after graduation, being outside an institution often means losing a social network, health insurance, stable income, and, most importantly, the confidence that both my research and I are valuable—that I am needed, that I am still part of the country in which I live.

Does this sound like a complaint? Yes, this is a complaint. For a long time, we have been taught that speaking about our struggles makes us appear weak, unqualified, and unprepared to succeed in this field and in this country. It reminds me of another early lesson I learned here: the answer to 'How are you?' had better always be positive. As a matter of academic practice, expressing one's struggles without emotion—preferably through theories and concepts—has long been valued. Indeed, if I could, I would choose to follow that manner. But if restrictions continue to tighten, if our space continues to narrow, while our labor and responsibilities continue to pile up, and while our communities—whether university communities, ethnic communities, international student communities, or any other communities to which we belong—are all facing challenges that require our labor and attention, then simply complaining, simply naming our pain, becomes an act of necessity, if not a form of refusal. Without speaking openly about our struggles, healing is not going to happen.

Indeed, as international students, we are only bound together by our visa status. We are so different. We may have nothing in common in terms of language, worldview, music, or culture. We also come from highly unequal geopolitical backgrounds in terms of resources and opportunities. Moreover, they often define the very struggles and difficulties we face. These inequalities are inscribed onto our bodies, our networks, our ways of understanding and responding to challenges in this country. Students who come from privileged backgrounds in their home countries, where access to education and substantial material support is often taken for granted, may develop very different perspectives and strategies from those who do not come from positions of privilege in terms of class, race, or gender. In fact, for some students, coming to the United States may be the only solution to the challenges they faced at home. Within the category of international students, the differences are enormous.

We are just a group of people imposed with the same label simply because of our visa status. Working in the International Student Network, I always ask myself: how can we serve such an extremely diverse and temporary group of students? Sometimes I even ask myself whether it is too arrogant to call for international students to gather, when we are so different, and the problems we face are so large that we cannot solve them on our own. If a student from Taiwan like me receives a five-year visa, how could I tell a student who only receives a one-year visa—and therefore has to return to their country every summer—how to navigate that obstacle? From this reality, healing or uniting seems impossible.

However, please, let's try. Maybe we can start by complaining together, as international students and scholars. The sense of alienation stems from immigration laws, linguistic and cultural barriers, and entrenched mindsets around competition, success, and self-worth—and this is a shared experience. Often being the few, if not the only, international students in the department, we must make our voices louder to break through the isolation, the loneliness, and the feeling of helplessness. So, let us complain together.

When I was drafting this letter, I couldn't help but think about the comments that the International Student Network received from our survey of international students at the 2023 SEM annual conference to understand their concerns and demands in academia:

"I believe that the department primarily sees our value in terms of diversifying the department or acquiring additional funding. When we initially accepted the offer, it was conveyed that everything would be well-managed and that we would receive support. However, whenever challenges arose, we were directed to the international student office. If we only belong to the international student office, why are we also being encouraged to assimilate into American culture? Saying 'I am sorry' doesn't help at all. I recognize that my tone may come across as assertive, but I think it's time to voice our struggles to those institutions."

Every year, I come back to this comment and ask myself how I can make this person's voice heard. I think it is now. Our voices should be heard, our experiences should be validated, and they should sound louder. So, if we complain, let's complain together.

Complaining together helps us to address our failures, and let me be the first one who openly share those failures. I failed so many times. Throughout the past academic year, I have applied to every single job I could in the U.S., yet I failed. Even though my rational self tells me that everyone is facing a hard time finding a job, including domestic scholars, each application still cannot help but turn into a Sisyphean struggle. The box in every application, 'Will you now or in the future require sponsorship...', alongside the increasing number of announcements stating 'We do not sponsor visas for this position,' have become a cruel reminder of my utter powerlessness and the self-doubt of what I am even trying to do here.

Now, I have to go back to Taiwan. This is not the end of the world, I know, and it might even be a good result for my career and health. However, I still have to go through the process of untangling societal expectations—the belief that staying in the US equals prestige. I grew up immersed in a society that believes that studying hard is the path to success, and in many cases, studying and staying in the US is the ultimate definition of that success. In this moment, after an entire PhD journey and after pushing myself this far, staying here feels like the only acceptable outcome of studying abroad. Especially now, with the ongoing political tensions and the looming threat of war back home, all the spotlight is on those who manage to stay. All of this makes this failure feel unbearable.

But I still failed, at least by my own definition. It took me two months to even begin to process this anger and to face the terrifying prospect of leaving the land I had called home for seven years. More so because my fieldwork was based in Southern California, leaving feels deeply painful. I am terrified; my own fear has even convinced me that all the effort, friendships, and love I've built with this land and its people will simply disappear after I leave.

This pain was so overwhelming that I felt I could no longer bear it alone. I started to open up about my pain. I told one of my international student friends about my frustration, carefully picking words to not overshow my fear of becoming a failure. To my surprise, she told me she never thought staying in the U.S. meant prestige, and that her culture doesn't carry that assumption either. I started to feel better because I realized the American dream is not a universal standard (I knew it in my brain, but I had never learned it by heart). I told another international student friend who is also going back to her home, and she told me that returning was actually her goal. That's when I learned that what I viewed as a failure could be someone else's milestone.

It was them who gave me the courage to call my friends in Taiwan, confessing, for the first time, that I am deeply afraid of failure and terrified of being a loser, even though I had

pretended not to care for so long. I even called my parents, who used to be strict and had been asking, “When are you getting a stable job?” for seven years. I also found the courage to say goodbye to mentors and friends in the field. And in every response I received, I realized that the love and friendship remained.

Without my international student peers, I could not have quieted the voices of failure in my mind. From them, I learned that even simply listening and sharing can help us navigate our current circumstances. Things were not as terrifying as I had feared once I started, and that courage to begin relied on speaking out about our struggles, sharing our pain, and venting together. Then, we came up with new ideas, because we all come from such different backgrounds. Sharing is what transforms our differences into a more powerful community.

So,

Let’s learn from each other, understand how others think, and embrace our differences.

Let’s complain together, strengthen together, and heal together.

Let’s go through this moment, TOGETHER.