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“To remain a world leader, the U.S. and its colleges and universities must be open to ensure that we do not become isolated from the discourse that occurs outside of our borders.” This is the urgent message that Harvard University President Lawrence Bacow sent to President Joe Biden before he assumed office.

As scientists, we believe that message is more vital now than ever. Global collaboration among researchers is essential for scientific discovery. From labs around the world, we are joining our voices to speak out against an action that is having a chilling effect on that collaboration – the unjust criminal prosecution of Harvard University Professor Charles Lieber.

Professor Lieber is one of the great scientists of his generation. A world-renowned pioneer in nanotechnology, he is among the few scientists in history to achieve election to the U.S. National Academies of science, medicine and engineering. His impact on the sciences has been amplified by the hundreds of students he has mentored, who have furthered science and technology around the world. Despite his standing in the scientific community – or perhaps because of it – he has become the target of a tragically misguided government campaign that is discouraging U.S. scientists from collaborating with peers in other countries, particularly China. In so doing, it is threatening not only the United States’ position as a world leader in academic research, but science itself.

In the name of combatting economic espionage, the Department of Justice has increasingly scrutinized members of the academic community. Several of its investigations reflect a fundamental misunderstanding of modern science, in which open-source practices make discoveries available to all. Lacking evidence of more serious wrongdoing, prosecutors have nonetheless charged scientists with federal crimes for alleged misstatements relating to ambiguous grant-related forms. At any other moment in history, such errors would be addressed through changes in university training and procedures (as recently implemented by institutions across the country) or possibly disciplinary actions. Now, the government has placed the entire onus on individual faculty and criminalized them – making scientists fearful of the international collaboration that drives so much progress.
Given his stature, Professor Lieber’s prosecution is the most notable by the government, but these prosecutions are rampant, including other immense talents like Gang Chen, a professor of mechanical engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who was charged with federal crimes for alleged failure to disclose his routine work reviewing grant proposals in another country. These cases are unprecedented and unfair.

We are speaking out now to support Professor Lieber in part because Harvard (unlike MIT) has not supported him in funding his legal defense – despite an unjust prosecution, a flawed prosecution theory, and Professor Lieber’s 30 years of dedicated service to the institution. As President Bacow acknowledges in other contexts, “Everyone deserves a fair process, and no one should ever again have to go to the same lengths to be heard.” In supporting Professor Lieber, we are standing up for both his remarkable contributions to education, science and technology, and the fundamental concepts of scholarly collaboration, academic freedom and scientific advancement.

Our efforts are all the more urgent as Professor Lieber is fighting for his life on another front. He is afflicted with an incurable lymphoma for which he has gone through multiple painful treatments all the while continuing to support his research trainees, careers of former trainees as well as work tirelessly on behalf of Harvard. Instead of devoting what may be the final months of his life to fulfilling his scientific and educational calling, he is tackling the monumental task of restoring his reputation.

While the damage that the federal government’s case has done to him cannot be reversed, the Department of Justice should prevent further harm to him and the scientific process by declining prosecution of his case and others like it. Time for Charles Lieber – and the entire global scientific community – is running out.

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