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**Latitudes: What Trump 2.0 means for international education**

1 message

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# Latitudes

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## The return of Donald Trump

International education had an [uneasy relationship](#) with Donald J. Trump during his first term in office, and his reelection to the presidency has many wondering what's next. Over the past week, I've spoken with leaders and experts and heard from many of you about the big questions Trump's victory poses for the field.

### **Will international-student interest in studying in the United States cool off?**

In pre-election surveys, foreign students consistently said that the outcome of the vote would have little effect on their decision to come to the United States. (Here's coverage of [one survey](#). And [another](#).) It's markedly different from four and eight years ago, when students

indicated they would reconsider pursuing a degree in America if Trump was in office.

One reason for students' more-muted concern may be that "risk is already baked in" when it comes to Trump and his policies, said David Weeks, chief operating officer of Sunrise International, which assists colleges in recruitment in China. Students may perceive Trump, and the United States, as less welcoming and have factored that into their choice to go abroad.

The number of new international students did fall during the first Trump administration, but the declines were not as precipitous as many had forecasted or feared. Chinese enrollments increased slightly over that time, Weeks said.

Still, [Project 2025](#), which many see as a blueprint for the new administration, calls for government officials to "end their current cozy deference to educational institutions" on student-visa policy and proposes to "eliminate or significantly reduce" visas to foreign students from "enemy nations" — which could include top sending countries like China and Iran.

Rajika Bhandari Advisors, an international-education research and strategy firm, is conducting a brief survey of current international students about their immediate reactions to and feelings about the election results. The [online survey](#) is fully anonymous and confidential.

### **Could policies or policy proposals be recycled from Trump's first term?**

Susie Wiles, who will be the White House chief of staff, told Republican donors this week that Trump would [immediately reinstate](#) several executive orders from his first term that President Biden had revoked. Wiles didn't specify which orders would be restored, but Trump has said he plans to revive a [ban on travelers](#), including students and scholars, from several predominantly Muslim countries.

Another Trump-era policy canceled under Biden that could be brought back is the [China Initiative](#), the federal investigation of academic and economic espionage with China.

Rather than start from scratch, Trump officials could use earlier proposals as templates — with, perhaps, some tweaking. A regulatory change that could have barred international students from the United

States for lengthy periods of time for [relatively minor infractions](#) was blocked in the courts because of rulemaking errors, not on substance. The clock ran out on putting in place a plan that would have [strictly capped](#) the amount of time foreign students could study here, replacing a system that permitted students to stay until they completed their degrees. “They could just pull those policies off the shelf,” said Sarah Spreitzer, vice president for government relations at the American Council on Education.

The architect of much of Trump’s agenda on immigration and visas, Stephen Miller, is expected to be named a senior policy adviser.

There’s also an advantage for international-education advocates in knowing what’s coming. “They’re more prepared,” said Miriam Feldblum, executive director of the Presidents’ Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, “and higher ed is more wary.”

### **Are academic and cultural exchange programs at risk?**

In his first term, Trump repeatedly proposed deep budget cuts to U.S. Department of State-funded exchanges, like the flagship Fulbright program, ranging from 56 percent to 78 percent.

Congress rejected Trump’s reductions — in fact, funding actually grew by about 17 percent over those four years, said Mark Overmann, executive director for the Alliance for International Exchange, a group that represents organizations and providers that run exchanges and support global-education programming. News that Trump plans to name Sen. Marco Rubio as secretary of state “provides some measure of optimism,” Overmann said, because the Florida lawmaker has supported exchange programs in the past.

But if Trump once again seeks to slash exchange spending, will there be bipartisan majorities in Congress to push back as in the past? Last year, an amendment in the House would have [zeroed out exchange funding](#), although it was dropped from a final bill.

### **What does the new administration mean for undocumented and refugee students?**

Pledges of mass deportation were some of the biggest applause lines of the Trump campaign, and there are concerns about what his election could mean for undocumented, immigrant, and refugee students. Trump could end programs that allow people fleeing war or crises in their home countries to live and work in the United States

and block states that give in-state tuition to undocumented students from receiving federal student aid. He could again seek to roll back the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, which provides legal protections to undocumented students and other young people.

“Anxiety and uncertainty are what’s really going to be a killer here,” said Gaby Pacheco, president of TheDream.US, a college-access program for undocumented students.

Read more: [What Trump’s Threats of Mass Deportation Could Mean for Higher Ed.](#)



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## Could Elon Musk influence Trump on international-student policy?

The tech billionaire turned Trump-campaign surrogate's name came up over and over in my post-election conversations: While Musk has echoed Trump's rhetoric about the dangers of illegal immigration, he's also a former foreign student and spent his career in Silicon Valley, which relies heavily on international graduates of American colleges and other skilled immigrants. Musk (who was recently in the news for [possible visa violations](#) during his student days) could be a prominent voice in the White House for policies that make it easier to attract and retain foreign talent. He could also use his ownership of the social-media platform X, where he has more than 204 million followers, to shape public opinion.

There is reason to think there could be daylight between Trump's border politics and skilled immigration. As president he proposed [immigration reform](#) that would favor "extraordinary talent," "professional and specialized vocations," and "exceptional students." During the campaign he said he would make it a "day one" priority to keep "brilliant" international students in the United State by [granting green cards](#) to foreign graduates of American colleges.

Still, over the years, Trump has threatened changes to [optional practical training](#), a program that allows foreign graduates to temporarily stay and work in the United States and is a big draw in international recruitment. Opponents of OPT, who say it takes jobs from Americans, hope that during a second term Trump would [limit or even eliminate the program](#).

### Will there be a flight of American students abroad?

Interest by young Americans in studying overseas spiked immediately after Trump's victory. Five times as many Americans searched for bachelor's and master's programs abroad on the day after the election than had prior to the vote, according to [Studyportals](#), a global-education platform. Among the nearly 11,000 Americans who signed

on to Studyportals, post-election interest surged for Britain, Canada, and Ireland.

Inquiries do not necessarily translate to enrollments, however. Over the past dozen years, a period that includes three presidential elections, there have only been minor fluctuations in the number of Americans pursuing full degrees abroad, said Leah Mason, deputy director of research for the Institute of International Education, which collects [student-mobility data](#). Overall growth is the result of adding new partner countries, Mason said, while American enrollments in the 14 countries that have consistently reported over that time have been largely unchanged.

### **Will international research again be under the microscope?**

Republican lawmakers, including Rubio, have been trying to restart the [China Initiative](#) since the Biden administration shut down the criminal investigation of academic ties to China by the Department of Justice. Their efforts have alarmed colleges and civil-rights groups who believe that the original probe chilled international-research partnerships and racially profiled Chinese and Chinese American scientists. Trump's return to the White House could reinvigorate the inquiry, which led to several, although mostly unsuccessful, prosecutions.

Potential Republican control of both the U.S. House and Senate could open the door to [more congressional oversight](#) of overseas academic engagement and legislation to prevent Chinese nationals from working on federally funded STEM research and [ban Chinese graduate students](#) in those fields. That said, concern about foreign influence on campus and desire to safeguard American science and intellectual property isn't a neatly partisan issue.

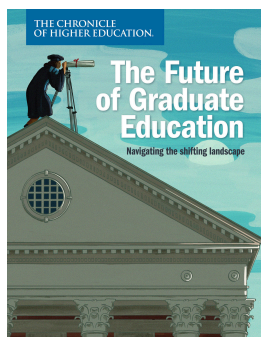
And in the four years since Trump left office, several states have imposed regulation of their own, such as a [Florida law](#) that restricts public colleges from hiring graduate assistants or visiting scholars from "countries of concern," including China, Iran, and Russia.

### **What about Congress?**

Trump's decisive victory has been in the spotlight, but congressional outcomes matter, too. International education has sometimes turned to Congress as a bulwark, as in its support of exchange funding. Lawmakers, however, have scrutinized foreign gifts and contracts to colleges in public hearings and modified legislation to force institutions

to close down Confucius Institutes, the Chinese-supported language and cultural centers, or [lose defense-research grants](#).

### From the Chronicle Store



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## Can international education make a compelling public case?

The economy was one of the most important issues for voters going to the polls, and it's clearly on the minds of leaders I spoke to. "International education is the answer to economic concerns," said Fanta Aw, executive director and chief executive of NAFSA: Association of International Educators.

Aw and her counterparts noted the many payoffs of international education: Foreign students support some 368,000 jobs and help fuel [college town economies](#). Education is one of America's largest service exports. International experiences, like study abroad, are valued by employers competing in a global market. A quarter of the billion-dollar startup companies in the United States have a [founder who first came here as an international student](#), and foreign-born researchers hold down a third of all jobs in critical STEM fields.

"This sort of education is not just nice to have but a need to have," Aw said. Making the economic case doesn't mean abandoning the cultural and linguistic arguments for international education, Aw added, but "we have to speak their language."

## How will international education respond to the Trump presidency?

Presidents and chancellors were important voices in support of international education during Trump's earlier term, speaking out against the travel ban and spearheading legal challenges to restrictive student-visa policies. But they may be more hesitant to take on potentially divisive issues in today's politically fractured climate. Some may be constrained from weighing in by [institutional-neutrality policies](#).

Feldblum, executive director of the Presidents' Alliance, said it was important for colleges not just to take a defensive posture to ward off criticism or unwelcome policy proposals, but to advocate for their own vision of international education. (The group is holding a [post-election briefing](#) this Friday.)

"It's not about keeping quiet," Feldblum said. "It's about embracing immigration and international education in forward-looking ways."

## Around the globe

**Two House committees announced** an [investigation of research security](#) at the National Science Foundation.

**Stephen D. Mull, vice provost for global affairs** at the University of Virginia, was appointed by Secretary Antony Blinken to [lead the State Department's transition team](#) between the Biden and Trump administrations.

**A French doctoral student who was in Tunisia** to do sociological research on the country's 2011 protests has been [detained](#) on state security charges.

**Corruption is undermining** [Iraq's](#) higher-education system.

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**Academic freedom could** be under threat in [Indonesia](#), where the newly elected president is known for his authoritarian stances.

**The majority of people worldwide who took** the Duolingo test of English did so for [academic reasons](#). During the pandemic, more American colleges accepted scores from the online test as proof of English proficiency because many exam centers around the globe had shut down.

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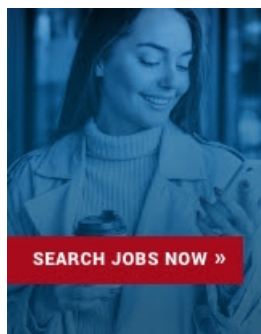
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