
Latitudes: Has Trump made the U.S. a no-go zone for foreign academics?

1 message

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Latitudes

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For some scholars, drawing the line on academic travel to the U.S.

The barrage of executive orders and policy decisions in the first weeks of the Trump administration has affected students, administrators, and faculty and staff members on campuses across the country and around the world.

For overseas scholars whose work and lives intersect with the United States, there are questions about whether this country will continue to be a fruitful place for collaboration and if they should travel here for research, conferences, and other academic work.

I spoke with Arn Keeling, a professor of geography at Memorial University, in the Canadian province of Newfoundland. (Full disclosure: my father taught at Memorial for decades, but Keeling and I connected a week ago via social media.) Keeling, whose research focuses on the environmental and social impacts of mining and other large-scale resource development on Indigenous communities, had been scheduled to be a panelist at the upcoming conference of the American Society for Environmental History, in April in Pittsburgh. He decided to pull out of the conference.

We discussed his reasoning for not traveling to the United States and where academics should draw the line. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Many American learned societies are effectively the default societies for their disciplines. As a geographer, I go to the American Association of Geographers fairly regularly. The conference that I had been accepted to and chose not to go to is kind of the marquee organization in that discipline. It was to be my first meeting since Covid.

I was really looking forward to going. It was not a a snap or knee-jerk decision not to go. When Canada came into the crosshairs [of the Trump administration] early on, that was a moment to say, what's my position vis-a-vis going to the United States.

While I'm a reluctant patriot and have complicated feelings about Canada, why would I spend tax dollars on travel to a country that has declared economic war on Canada? Those are discretionary funds that I could just as well spend on a conference in Canada or in the Nordic countries where I have a lot of collaborations. It seemed to be something I could do in a public way to say I don't think that this is acceptable.

It's a pretty crude taxpayer-dollar metric. It's five nights in a hotel. I'm an enthusiastic microbrew consumer, and there'd be some wonderful beers to drink in Pittsburgh.

I think Canadians feel this intensely. My parents are American. All my extended family is American. I did a postdoc that was NSF-funded at Montana State. Canadians feel fraternal in a lot of ways with Americans. We don't see it as an us vs. them thing.

I see people talking about feeling unsafe about going to the U.S., which less applies to me as a white male. I have that privilege, but there are others who may feel genuinely and not unreasonably unsafe.

I also have the luxury of career stage. I don't need to go to this conference for a line on my CV or for a job. I have junior colleagues, and even graduate students, who I know are not in the same position, and I would not begrudge them going.

I suppose at the end of the day it's like anything in the boycott, divest, and sanction movement: It comes down to where you draw the line. Lots of places are compromised. I recently was in Morocco, and it was remarkably welcoming and felt amazingly safe. But is it high on the democracy index?

This feels weirdly redolent of the Soviet period, when people made the argument that scientific cooperation and collaboration should not be stalled by the fact that there was ideological opposition between


the Soviets and the West. In fact, it was strategically seen as a positive engagement. So I do feel a twinge of conscience. It's not about American scholars.

I'm out here on an island in the North Atlantic Ocean, at a small comprehensive institution. I know it's not changing the world. But it's trying to do something that's conscience-driven.

Along with my colleagues Christa Dutton and Megan Zahneis, I spoke with people across higher education about the disruption, confusion, and anxiety they are experiencing. [Read the stories](#) of a researcher who had to remove "climate" from all federal grants, an employee of a tribal college that lost a third of its staff, and an undocumented student who no longer sees her campus as safe, among others.

We'd also like to hear about the impact on you — you can share your experience [here](#). And as always, you can reach me at karin.fischer@chronicle.com.

Upcoming Workshop



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We've partnered with experienced academic leaders at Dever Justice LLC to design a virtual four-hour program for aspiring administrators. This workshop will offer faculty members the

opportunity to explore a potential career path in academic administration, with insights on the personal, professional, and logistical steps involved. [Learn more and register.](#)

Congress warns colleges about partnerships with China

A top congressional oversight committee has begun an investigation into foreign funds coming to American colleges, while other lawmakers urged three Michigan institutions to cut academic ties with China.

Rep. James Comer, a Kentucky Republican and chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, [notified](#) the U.S. Department of Education that his panel was opening an investigation into its handling and enforcement of colleges' compliance with statutory foreign-funds reporting requirements. He asked the department to provide information about inquiries opened and closed under the Biden administration and about institutions referred to the U.S. attorney general for noncompliance.

“American academia remains a target of foreign malign influence, particularly to countries whose interests are antithetical to America and its national security,” Comer wrote. His letter was co-signed by Rep. Virginia Foxx, a North Carolina Republican who was, until recently, chairwoman of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce.

A recently released [review](#) by the inspector general of the Education Department found that department's oversight “needs improvement.” The department does not have “any monitoring plans, policies, or

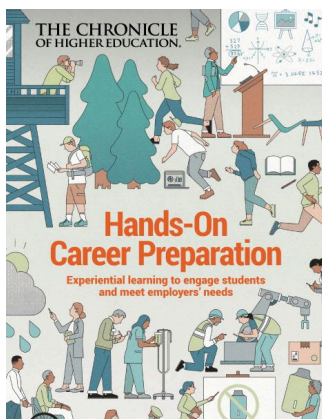
procedures in place for its oversight,” the review found, and instead relies on whistleblower complaints, news reports, and other outside mechanisms to alert it to possible reporting violations.

Meanwhile, the new education-committee chairman, along with the leader of a House select committee on China, sent their own [letters](#) to three Michigan institutions — Eastern Michigan University, Oakland University, and the University of Detroit Mercy. Partnerships with institutions in “adversary” nations like China jeopardize national security and should be terminated, the lawmakers, Reps. John Moolenaar and Tim Walberg, warn. Both men are Michigan Republicans.

Already, [Oakland University](#) has said it will sever its ties with China.

Several other institutions — including the Georgia Institute of Technology, the University of Michigan, and the University of California at Berkeley — have [shuttered joint institutes](#) with China under congressional pressure.

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Here are the Fulbright top producers

Some 130 colleges were named the top producers of Fulbright students and scholars in 2024-25. [See if your institution made the list.](#)

Funding for international education and exchange programming is currently [frozen](#) while the State Department conducts a review. Check back here for ongoing coverage of Fulbright and other programs.

Meet Latitudes at AIEA

Heading to the [annual conference](#) of the Association of International Education Administrators in Houston, March 2 to 5? Join me for a timely roundtable discussion about international education and diversity, equity, and inclusion on Tuesday, March 4, at 1 p.m. CT. This will be an open and freewheeling conversation, so please bring your thoughts and questions.

What panels, sessions, and events should I check out at AIEA? Send me your recommendations at karin.fischer@chronicle.com. I hope to see you there!

Around the globe

A federal judge has blocked the Trump administration from carrying out [immigration raids](#) in some places of worship, but the ruling does not apply to colleges.

Demonstrations broke out in Iran over lax [campus security](#) after a student at the University of Tehran was fatally attacked by robbers.

Students at the University of Cape Town, in South Africa, returned to classes after days of protests over [high student debt](#).

[Russia](#) and [Japan](#) have the same idea — recruit more students from Africa.

A government proposal in Japan would eliminate or significantly reduce [college tuition](#) for families with three or more children.

Jane Gatewood, vice provost for global engagement at Emory University, has been named [senior international officer of the year](#) by the Institute of International Education.

Mike Pompeo, who served as secretary of state during the first Trump administration, will teach a class on [diplomacy](#) at Columbia University this spring.

Thanks for reading. I always welcome your feedback and ideas for future reporting, so drop me a line at karin.fischer@chronicle.com. You can also connect with me on [X](#), [LinkedIn](#), or [Bluesky](#). If you like this newsletter, please share it with colleagues and friends. They can [sign up here](#).

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