

Latitudes: A 'trickle' of funding resumes for international education and exchange programs

1 message

Karin Fischer <newsletter@newsletter.chronicle.com>

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Reply-To: newsletter@newsletter.chronicle.com
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Latitudes

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A slight thaw in a funding freeze

The U.S. Department of State has released a small portion of frozen funding that has imperiled key international education and exchange programs like the Fulbright and Gilman scholarships.

Some funding is “trickling through,” a month after the State Department quietly suspended all grant payments, said Mark Overmann, executive director for the Alliance for International Exchange. Overmann, whose organization represents groups and providers that run exchanges and support global-education programming, estimates that about 15 percent of pending payments have begun to be disbursed over the last few days.

A [website](#) run by the Department of Government Efficiency, the cost-cutting effort started by the Trump administration, also confirms that some funding has been released.

The Alliance and other international-education associations last week [announced a campaign](#) to restore the spending after a 15-day review period expired. More than 20,000 people have written to members of Congress to call for the funding, which had already been appropriated, to be restarted.

Overmann called the recent payments a positive sign but noted most of the spending backlog has yet to be relieved. The freeze, which was never publicly announced, left exchange students struggling to pay rent, colleges searching for stopgap funding, and groups that administer the programs facing layoffs.

“Funds that may be dribbling out now are only addressing the deficit created by the funding pause,” said Jill Allen Murray, deputy director of public policy for NAFSA: Association of International Educators, who noted that program administrators are typically paid in arrears.

“This trickle does nothing to alleviate the uncertainty about funds for students and scholars in the pipeline who have not yet been posted

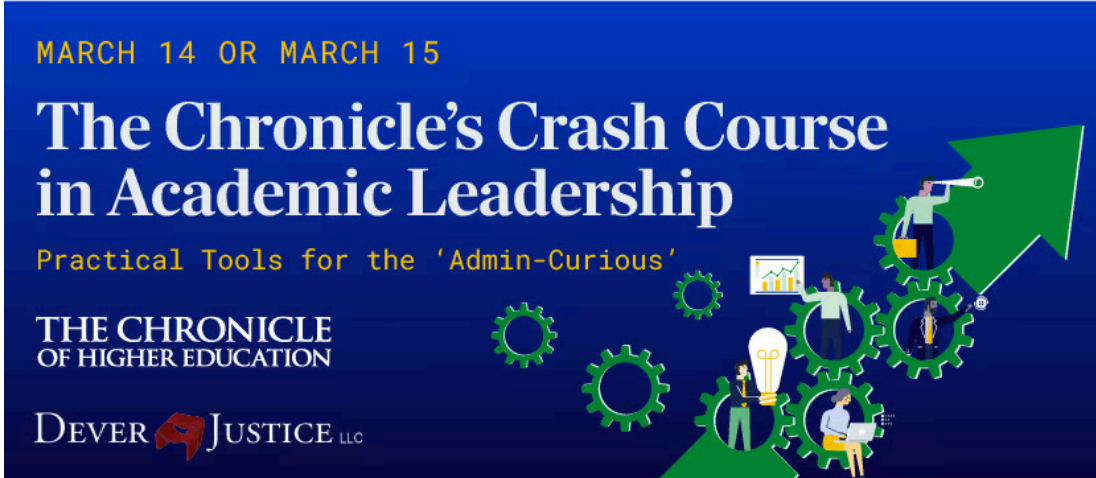
and the very survival of these programs. The fact remains that the freeze hasn't been lifted, and this is still a huge problem for participants and the programs that support them, with major long-term ramifications for the U.S. economy and national security.”

Overmann said that it is unclear if the payments signal a regular resumption of funding, nor is there any indication about why specific spending has been restored. He also noted that the money that has been coming in does not cover operational or staff costs for the groups that administer many of the State Department programs.

There are about 8,000 American-based employees who work for such organizations, who run programs for high-school students, young leaders, and professionals, in addition to academic programs for college students and scholars.

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At AIEA, an undercurrent of anxiety caused by Trump

The uncertainty and upheaval of the first weeks of the Trump administration was the stormy backdrop to last week's meeting of the Association of International Education Administrators, sometimes threatening to eclipse the conference's other themes.

Discussions — whether about global learning, the future of foreign-student recruitment, or access to study abroad — seemed to inexorably circle back to the impact of President Trump's policy pronouncements and cost cutting on American colleges and international education.

But common concerns didn't necessarily yield a consensus response. Some attendees were charged up, calling for public protest and even civil disobedience. One campus administrator, who had favored a more low-key approach eight years ago, told me that he was now speaking out in opposition to administrative actions, like cuts to scholarships that help low-income students go abroad.

Others, however, said they were wary of drawing additional political fire, arguing that they could be more effective through action than advocacy. One red-state participant said she was focused on finding alternative funding for programs rather than protesting cutbacks. An unusually high number of conference panels, some on seemingly anodyne topics, were closed to the press.

As always, AIEA sparked new ideas and introduced me to creative and inventive projects; I look forward to sharing my reporting in the future. For now, a few observations:

There was a sense of déjà vu — but it wasn't a rerun. In 2017, AIEA met in the wake of President Trump's first-administration [travel ban](#). Then, as now, many attendees told me about the solidarity and comfort they felt being around other international-education leaders dealing with similar challenges. Many compared it to group therapy.

While this year's conference struck a similar emotional register, the scope of policy actions taken by the new administration meant that there wasn't a single marquee issue on which to focus. Instead, many administrators categorized their work as responding to multiple fires: finding stopgap support for Fulbright scholars who'd lost their stipends, figuring out how to continue canceled programs, dealing with student fears about possible immigration raids on campus or disruptions to overseas travel.

Nor is the turmoil confined to the international office. With the administration's [broad crackdown on higher education](#), other issues — like widespread cuts to research funding and newly-opened civil-rights investigations — may be occupying presidents' and chancellors' attention.

What about DEI? In recent years, there has been more focus on the common ground between the crosscultural learning of international education and colleges' diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. With [state and national attacks on DEI](#), will that continue?

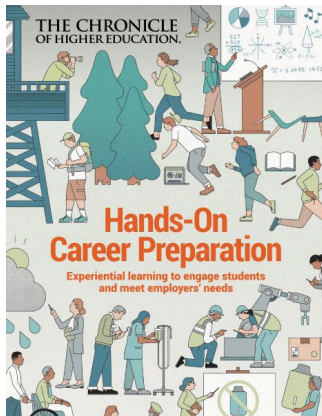
One international administrator, whose campus DEI office has been disbanded, said she was de-emphasizing similar aspects of her own center's work in hopes of staying out of political crosshairs. Others said the two fields were distinct enough that they didn't feel equipped to step into the vacuum left by DEI cuts. But others said they had a

responsibility to continue the work of advocating for equity and understanding across difference.

Can international education make its case? For some time, international education has been wrestling with how to [tell its own story](#), both to elected officials and the broader public. Some argue that the field needs to “speak the language” of policymakers, emphasizing bottom-line data, like the economic impact of the more than one million foreign students in the United States or the employability benefits of education abroad. Others counter that such defenses have done little to move public perception and that educators need to make the case differently, such as through highlighting the human aspects of these activities on individuals.

Today’s less-favorable environment makes the need for effective self-advocacy greater. But the three-day conference seems to have done little to settle this internal debate.

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International graduate threatened with deportation over protests

The Trump administration is trying to deport a Columbia University graduate who led campus protests as an international student.

Immigration officials arrested Mahmoud Khalil on Saturday, following through on [threats](#) to deport international students and scholars who take part in protests related to the war in Gaza. Khalil, who had been a spokesman for pro-Palestinian demonstrators, is now a legal permanent resident of the United States but had studied at Columbia on a student visa. He graduated in December.

Trump said on Monday that Khalil's detention was "the first arrest of many to come."

A spokeswoman for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security said Khalil was arrested for "activities aligned to Hamas, a designated terrorist organization." His lawyers said Khalil has not been charged with a crime. A judge blocked his deportation until a hearing can be held on the legality of his detention.

While violations of the law can run afoul of visa rules, experts said that deporting foreign students for engaging in peaceful protest would violate their free-speech rights. Khalil's case could have a chilling effect on international students, Jaclyn Kelley-Widmer, a clinical professor of law at Cornell, [told](#) my colleague Alissa Gary.

"People have to gauge their own sense of risk based on their own personal situation and convictions to decide how they want to engage," Kelley-Widmer said. "But I do think that immigrant students may be more hesitant to engage after this."

Meanwhile, the State Department said last week that it revoked the visa of an international student because of their part in "Hamas-supporting disruptions." It's unclear if the revocation, first reported by [Fox News](#), referred to Khalil or to another student.

The department also told Fox that it had reviewed 100,000 student visas and found none were voided during protests over the Israel-Hamas war during the Biden administration.

Axios [reported](#) that the State Department will use artificial intelligence to review the social-media accounts of international students to look for evidence of alleged terrorist sympathies.

The American Civil Liberties Union sent a [letter](#) to college leaders to provide a legal framework for dealing with the executive orders related to campus protests.

Colleges “should encourage robust discussion and exploration of ideas by students, faculty, and staff, regardless of their nationality or immigration status,” the ACLU wrote.

More Trump news

Here’s more news related to the Trump administration and international education:

- Staff members at EducationUSA, the State Department-run worldwide network of college-advising centers, have gotten [conflicting advice](#) on how to promote and discuss their work since the start of the Trump administration. At one point, advisers were told to halt all external communications, including answering questions from prospective international students. They also were sent messaging guidance, which has since been rescinded, that said they should use “neutral and plain language” and avoid terms like “diversity,” “minority,” and “women.”
- Government officials are expected to release a “[red list](#)” of countries whose citizens are barred from entering the United States. The countries

could include some of those in Trump's earlier [travel ban](#), like Iran and North Korea, as well as nations like Afghanistan and Pakistan. Shortly after taking office in January, the president [ordered](#) federal agencies to identify countries that pose such a significant security risk that incoming travel should be blocked or otherwise restricted. It's not clear if students would be included in a new ban.

- More than 140 college-based research and capacity-building projects could be at risk of termination because of President Trump's efforts to shut down the U.S. Agency for International Development, my colleague Dan Bauman [found](#).
- Cuts to the federal workforce, including to research and standards-setting agencies, could undermine American competitiveness and cede ground on innovation to China, some Democratic lawmakers [warned](#). Already, Chinese tech recruiters have been seeking to [attract](#) American scientists.

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Around the globe

Aix-Marseille University in France announced a [new program](#) for scientists who "may feel threatened or hindered" in the United States and want "to continue their work in an environment conducive to innovation, excellence, and academic freedom."

Incidents of antisemitism have spiked on [German campuses](#).

Sudanese universities have been ordered by the government to close [satellite centers](#) they opened in other countries to serve students who fled the country during a nearly two-year [civil war](#) and to return to their home campuses.

China's highest court is calling for stricter punishments for [research fraud](#) and a crackdown on paper mills that churn out fake or poor-quality manuscripts.

The number of foreign academics in China cratered during the [pandemic](#).

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