
Latitudes: Amid efforts to deport protesters, foreign students reconsider risk

1 message

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Latitudes

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**International students and scholars wonder if it
is safe to speak out**

The Trump administration's aggressive steps to penalize international student activists at Columbia University has unnerved other foreign students and left those who advise them unsure of how to provide support.

Immigration officials have detained and are [seeking to deport](#) Mahmoud Khalil, a former international graduate student who now holds a green card, for his part in pro-Palestinian protests. Another foreign student has been arrested, while a third, who said she never took part in campus demonstrations, [fled to Canada](#).

President Trump's public criticism of protesters and [threats to revoke the visas](#) of the international students among them is not new. And some foreign students, aware of their status as visitors in the United States, have been previously [hesitant to speak out](#) on sensitive topics — even though they have the same free-speech rights as American citizens.

Still, the current climate is exceptional, longtime international educators said. "It's never been so discouraging," said one foreign-student adviser, whose years in the field have included both the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the Covid pandemic. Like other administrators who spoke with *The Chronicle*, they asked that they and their institution not be identified because they did not have their colleges' approval to talk about politically sensitive topics.

In January, Trump signed executive orders on antisemitism that said that colleges should "monitor" international students and employees who take part in pro-Palestinian protests, which could lead to "actions to remove" them from the country.

The adviser said their institution had shared guidance about what to do if approached by immigration agents on campus. When students come to their office to ask about traveling overseas during spring

break, the adviser tells them that they may want to “think carefully” about their plans.

“I tell them I’m hear to listen” if they want to talk about their anxieties and concerns, the adviser said. “But I’m not an immigration lawyer. I tell them I don’t have answers.”

Even the immigration lawyers are struggling to offer guidance. “The current moment is different than any moment I’ve lived through,” said Elora Mukherjee, a law professor at Columbia and director of the university’s Immigrants’ Rights Clinic.

For one, the Trump administration rescinded a longstanding U.S. Department of Homeland Security policy that [restricted immigration arrests](#) on college and school campuses, churches, hospitals, and other sensitive areas, Mukherjee said.

Officials at the highest levels of government have been unequivocal in their intent to take action against international students who engage in campus protests. Trump called Khalil’s arrest “the first of many.” “No one has a right” to a student visa, Secretary of State Marco Rubio said.

“If you tell us when you apply for a visa, ‘I’m coming to the U.S. to participate in pro-Hamas events,’ that runs counter to the foreign policy interest of the United States of America,” Rubio said in an interview on CBS. “If you had told us that you were going to do that, we never would have given you the visa.”

The government’s basis for arresting Khalil is unusual, citing a little-used statute that says it can initiate deportation processes against anyone whose presence in the United States is deemed adversarial to foreign-policy interests.

An international Ph.D. student at Cornell University, along with two other protest organizers, are plaintiffs in a [lawsuit](#) challenging Trump’s

executive orders on campus speech as unconstitutional.

“People who thought they could speak out safely now wonder if they can,” Mukherjee said. There is “heightened alarm,” she added, among international, immigrant, and undocumented students — and among postdocs, professors, and visiting scholars without American citizenship. “That is terrifying.”

Customs officials over the weekend [expelled](#) an assistant professor and doctor at Brown University after finding photographs of Hassan Nasrallah, the former Hezbollah leader, on her cellphone when she tried to return to the United States from Lebanon.

One international student at a mid-Atlantic college said she had been a “casual supporter” of protests against the Israel-Hamas war, not attending demonstrations herself but occasionally reposting others’ social-media messages on the conflict. The student, who also asked not to use her name, said she occasionally felt “panicked” that a text or tweet could jeopardize her education. “What am I supposed to do, go through and delete every Instagram like?” she said.

In fact, some students who expressed views about the conflict may want to delete their social-media accounts, Mukherjee said. Students may want to reconsider personal or academic travel or stay away from campus protests. “We ask students to think through their risk factors,” she said.

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International-programs staff hit by Dept. of Education layoffs

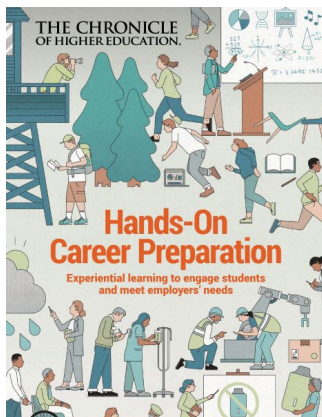
Mass layoffs at the U.S. Department of Education have decimated the office in charge of administering its international-education programs.

All staff members in the Office of International and Foreign Languages Education lost their jobs, including its leadership, a source confirmed to *The Chronicle*. Education Secretary Linda McMahon last week [eliminated](#) nearly half of the department's staff in what many fear could be a precursor to attempts by the Trump administration to shutter the entire agency.

Among the Education Department's international programs are the Fulbright-Hays program, which supports graduate students' overseas research and study; the Foreign Language and Area Studies fellowships for foreign language and international studies for undergraduate and graduate students; and National Resource Centers, college-based centers for teaching critical languages and area studies.

In a statement, McMahon said the Education Department would "continue to deliver on all statutory programs that fall under the agency's purview, including formula funding, student loans, Pell Grants, funding for special needs students, and competitive grantmaking." But there are concerns that the job cuts could jeopardize the disbursement of [federal student aid](#). And international educators said that they were unsure how global-education programs would continue with no or skeletal staff to administer them.

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U.S. quizzes foreign researchers on DEI and gender

The Trump administration has sent questionnaires to Australian and Canadian academics engaged in collaborative research with American partners, asking whether their work aligns with views it has advanced on climate, gender, and diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Scholars were asked to respond to a series of questions, including whether their research is a “no DEI project” or a “climate or ‘environmental justice’ project” and if they are taking “appropriate measures to protect women and to defend against gender ideology” and to combat “Christian prosecution.” They were also asked about their ties to China.

The questionnaire, which recipients were given 48 hours to respond to, was initially reported by [Australian media](#) and the [Canadian Association of University Teachers](#). It’s unclear whether academics in other countries who work on joint projects that receive U.S. government funding were sent similar disclosure documents.

The United States is the largest research partner for Australian and Canadian universities. Higher-education leaders in both countries expressed concern about implications for international academic collaboration, calling the questionnaire “blatant foreign interference.”

In other recent developments:

The Institute of International Education has furloughed most employees who work on EducationUSA, the worldwide network of American academic-advising centers, run with the State Department. In a [message](#), IIE acknowledged that the furloughs would create challenges for colleges and foreign students but said they were necessary because of executive orders, program suspensions, and a [freeze of State Department grants](#). The furloughs began on Friday for most American-based EducationUSA team members.

It's unclear if the employment freeze will affect employees overseas. The organization also said it was furloughing some staff members who run academic-exchange programs such as the Fulbright, Gilman, and Humphrey fellowships.

The Department of Homeland Security has terminated an advisory commission that provides advice on student visas, foreign influence on campus, and other areas where homeland security and education intersect. The [Homeland Security Academic Partnership Council](#) was one of eight advisory groups [disbanded](#) by the department in response to a presidential order that directed agencies to do away with “unnecessary” councils and other government entities. President Trump also eliminated the commission during his first term in office, but it was [reinstated](#) under the Biden administration.

A proposed expansion of the college-endowment tax could discourage institutions from enrolling international students. A draft plan would exclude foreign students from colleges' calculation of endowment size by full-time equivalent students, which would increase the number of institutions subject to the tax. Brian Flahaven, vice president for strategic partnerships at the Council for Advancement and Support of Education, [told](#) my colleague Lee Gardner that the provision could also be a tactic to push colleges to admit a larger share of American students.

House bill would bar Chinese students

Congressional Republicans are seeking to bar all Chinese students from studying in the United States, calling them a threat to national security.

[Legislation](#) introduced by Rep. Riley M. Moore of West Virginia seeks to “turn off the spigot and immediately ban all student visas going to Chinese nationals.” He accused the Chinese government of abusing the visa system to poach scientific know-how and spread their influence on American campuses. “We’ve literally invited the [Chinese Communist Party] to spy on our military, steal our intellectual property, and threaten national security,” Riley said, citing the case of several students arrested last year for photographing U.S.-Taiwan military exercises.

More than 277,000 Chinese students are enrolled in American colleges, the second-largest group of international students in the United States.

The Committee of 100, a nonprofit organization of prominent Chinese Americans, criticized the bill. “Shutting the door on Chinese students doesn’t just betray our values — it weakens our leadership in science, technology, and innovation,” said Gary Locke, the group’s chairman and a former U.S. ambassador to China.

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Around the globe

A scholarship program that sends top American students to Ireland will [remain paused](#) for another year because of concerns about sustainable funding. The George J. Mitchell Scholarship Program also did not select a class for the current academic year.

Serbian officials reduced [college tuition](#) by up to 50 percent in response to demands by student protesters.

Afghan women studying in Oman could be forced to return home after their [scholarships](#) from the U.S. Agency for International Development were ended.

Women enrolling in higher education in [India](#) jumped 26 percent last year.

Taiwan's government is taking steps to put in place more research-security measures and [limit exchanges](#) with colleges in mainland China.

A student who used a fake New York University transcript to gain admission to the Chinese University of Hong Kong was jailed for three months.

Academic freedom in the United States is declining, but the erosion began long before the latest attacks on higher education, according to a [new report on academic freedom worldwide](#).

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