

Latitudes: Worried about the future, international-ed groups go on offense

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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Survival of study-abroad and exchange programs is threatened, advocates say

Faced with a funding pause that may have become a full-fledged stoppage, global-education groups are appealing to Congress to push President Trump to restore spending on international education and exchange programs run by the U.S. Department of State.

The State Department informed grant recipients in mid-February that it was suspending all payments for a [15-day review](#). Among the programs affected by the freeze were the prominent Fulbright and Gilman scholarships as well as foreign-language and study-abroad programming.

The review period expired on February 27, but little, if any, money has been disbursed — leaving exchange students struggling to pay rent, colleges searching for stopgap funding, and groups that administer the programs facing layoffs.

On Monday, international-education groups said they were beginning a campaign to get Congress to intervene. “The freeze on State Department grant programs threatens the survival of study abroad and international-exchange programs that are essential to U.S. economic and national security,” said Fanta Aw, executive director of [NAFSA: Association of International Educators](#). “Restoring this funding immediately is absolutely in the country’s national interest.”

The [Alliance for International Exchange](#) said the freeze “paralyzes” programs that serve 12,500 American students, youth, and professionals who are currently abroad or who could go overseas in the next six months.

At the meeting this week in Houston of the Association of International Education Administrators, conference-goers were encouraged to download a QR code to send messages of support for the programs to their senators and congressmen.

“The abrupt suspensions casts serious doubt on the survival of these programs,” Amir Reza, AIEA’s president, said in opening remarks at the conference. “We need to be united at this moment.”

Concern about the freeze and its impact dominated conversation during the three-day meeting. One administrator said his campus was scrambling to find money to pay a Fulbright scholar who was the campus’s sole Chinese-language instructor. Another was unsure whether to go ahead with planning for faculty-run education-abroad programs supported by a capacity-building grant.

“We don’t have money for this,” said the administrator, who asked not to be identified because he isn’t authorized to speak with reporters. “Our budget is tight.”

John Sunnygard, associate provost for global learning and international affairs at Western Kentucky University, was worried about 17 of his students who had been awarded Gilman scholarships, which go to low-income and first-generation students. Many had already purchased nonrefundable plane tickets and paid program deposits for summertime international study.

“They were promised a scholarship and made a financial commitment,” Sunnygard said. “These are kids from rural areas who have never been on a plane. We bought their passports.”

Applications for the next round of Gilman funding are due on Thursday.

Some foreign students in the United States on short-term programs were notified that their programs were subject to an “immediate stop” and that they had to leave the country. “It is not possible for you to remain in the United States,” read a message shared with *The Chronicle*.

A Fulbright scholar doing graduate work at a Midwestern university said she had received only a quarter of her regular monthly stipend, or about \$330, over the weekend from the Institute of International Education, which administers the program. It left her unable to pay her rent; she is relying on a food bank.

“I’ve got zero idea how to pay for my apartment. I’ve got zero idea about what to do with my belongings if I get evicted,” said the student, who asked not to be named so as not to jeopardize her visa status.

The graduate student said her institution had been trying to help, writing to her landlord that her inability to pay rent was beyond her control and asking for a waiver of any late-payment fees. She said she felt lucky compared to some other Fulbright scholars whose tuition payments for the spring semester had not been received before the funding pause. But it was a struggle to concentrate on studying for midterm exams, she said.

A person familiar with administration of the programs said there has been no formal announcement or written guidance from the State Department or the Trump administration about the suspension of funding or the goals of the review. “No one knows the next steps.”

The State Department did not respond to a request for comment.

Without reimbursements, organizations that are contracted by the department to run the programs have been dipping into their own funds to pay administrative costs and salaries. Some have furloughed employees or cut back on benefits. IIE last week laid off a number of employees.

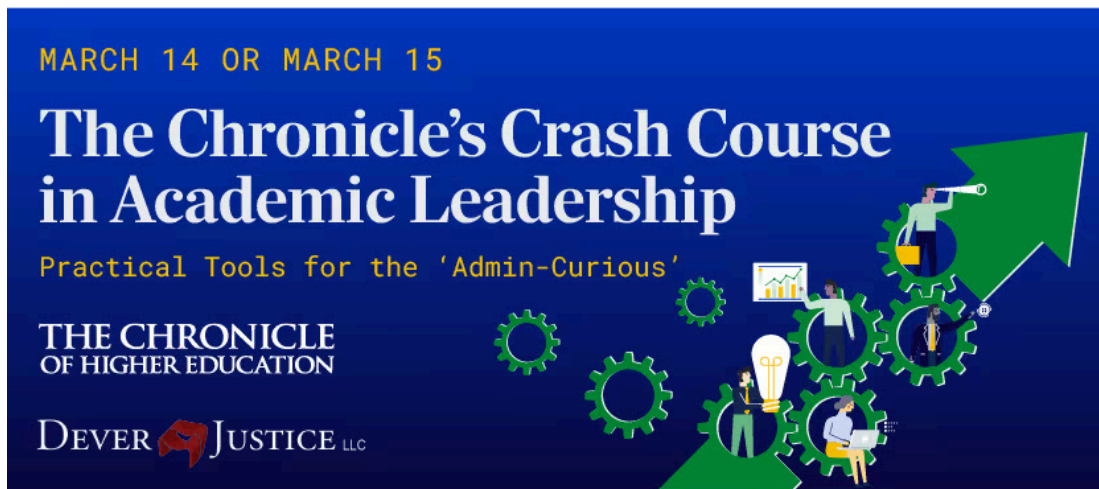
The funding freeze affects grant programs across the State Department, but President Trump repeatedly tried to make specific cuts to international education and exchanges during his first term. Congress repeatedly [restored](#) the money.

“Congress appropriated this funding to make us safer, stronger, and more competitive,” said Melissa Torres, president of the Forum for Education Abroad, paraphrasing Secretary of State Marco Rubio’s remarks at his welcome ceremony.

“We’re urging Congress to advocate for and believe in their own appropriations,” Torres said.

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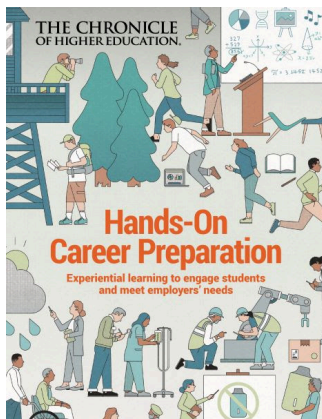
More Trump news

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security [announced](#) it will require undocumented immigrants above the age of 14 years old to register and provide their fingerprints to the federal government. Those who do not could potentially face criminal prosecution. “President Trump and Secretary Noem have a clear message for those in our country illegally: Leave now,” a spokeswoman said in a statement, referring to Kristi Noem, the homeland-security secretary.

President Trump issued an [executive order](#) designating English as the country’s official language. More than 30 states have already made English the official language. While more than three-quarters of Americans [speak only English](#) at home, there are 42 million Spanish speakers in the country and three million speakers of Chinese.

Europe could be a “[haven](#)” for scientists affected by funding cuts and policy changes. European research agencies are considering measures to attract American researchers as well as others who might otherwise have gone to the United States. “Recent global developments” are “an opportunity for Europe to position itself as an attractive destination for top talent and research excellence,” said the European Commissioner for research and innovation.

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New report calls for investment in U.S. scientific competitiveness

The United States must take more deliberate and far-reaching steps to ensure it remains competitive in a global innovation race, a group of academic, business, government, and philanthropic leaders said in a [report](#) released last week.

The “Vision for American Science and Technology” recommendations sound [familiar themes](#): In addition to encouraging more Americans to study in critical STEM fields, the United States should make it easier to [recruit and retain top scientists and researchers](#). Among the task force’s suggestions, reform the skilled-worker visa program, establish a global talent-recruitment effort, and make it easier for foreign graduates of American colleges to get green cards.

Although the ideas are not new, the current environment is much changed, even from when the group began its work last summer. Since taking office five weeks ago, the Trump administration has [cut scientific and other research funding](#) and [increased scrutiny of student-visa holders](#).

Around the globe

Members of Congress have [reintroduced legislation](#) that would give legal status and a pathway to citizenship to undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as children.

Canada's immigration minister said colleges admit [too many students from India](#) and should diversify their international enrollments.

Hungary is challenging a European Union decision to [exclude](#) its institutions from receiving research grants and taking part in student exchanges because of concerns about [academic-governance changes](#).

Academic boycotts against Israel have [increased](#) 66 percent since the start of the Israel-Hamas war.

Students have played a prominent role in [protests](#) in the country of Georgia, pitting those who want closer ties with Europe and the West against the pro-Russian government.

Students in Bangladesh who helped organize demonstrations that [toppled](#) the country's long-serving prime minister have formed their own [political party](#).

Students led rallies in cities across [Indonesia](#) against government budget cuts to education and other priorities.

Hong Kong universities face budget cuts and could have to [return some reserve funds](#) to the government amid an economic squeeze.

More current world leaders graduated from British universities than from institutions in any other country, including the United States, an [analysis](#) shows.

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And finally ...

Education will be necessary to heal political and cultural divisions, both in the United States and around the world, the former presidential national-security adviser Fiona Hill said at the AIEA conference.

In her remarks, Hill, who is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and chancellor of Durham University, in Britain, said that populist movements have attracted those “left behind economically and left out politically.”

Hill, who grew up in northern England, compared it to places like the American Rust Belt. To bring young and disaffected voters back into the political system, education must play a central role. At Durham, Hill, a Russia expert who became a household name during the Trump impeachment hearings, recently started a scholarship for low-income students.

“These rifts,” she said, “are things that can be mended.”

I’m reporting this week from the AIEA meeting in Houston. Look for more coverage in upcoming newsletters.

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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