

Latitudes: Trump administration eyes colleges' ability to enroll foreign students

1 message

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Some colleges could lose approval to enroll international students

Colleges that are too “pro-Hamas” could be blocked from enrolling international students, the Trump administration warns.

The threat to pull colleges’ federal student-visa authorization is another escalation of President Trump’s crackdown on both immigration and campus protest. And much like the abrupt revocation of the visas of international-student activists in recent days, the decertification plan could barrel past norms and safeguards, disregarding established rules and processes.

A senior State Department official told [Axios](#) that all colleges approved to enroll foreign students would be subject to a review. “You can have so many bad apples in one place that it leads to decertification of the school,” the official said. “I don’t think we’re at that point yet. But it is not an empty threat.”

[Immigration arrests](#) of students and scholars have multiplied, including a Turkish graduate student at Tufts University whose [on-the-street detention](#) by masked agents went viral. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said last week that some 300 visas of students and other visitors had been revoked on his order, citing little-used State Department authority to rescind visas for foreign-policy reasons.

“They’re visitors to the country. If they’re taking activities that are counter to our foreign — to our national interest, to our foreign policy, we’ll revoke the visa,” Rubio [told reporters](#). “No one has a right to a visa.”

Rubio also sent a [cable](#) instructing American diplomats overseas to scrutinize the social-media accounts of some student-visa applicants as part of an effort to ban those critical of the United States and Israel from entering the country.

Now the administration could be upping the ante by seeking to penalize colleges. Although a [presidential order](#) previously directed colleges to “monitor” students and employees who take part in

campus protests, going after the ability of institutions to admit international students could hit them where it hurts — tuition dollars from foreign students have become increasingly important to many colleges' [bottom lines](#). Columbia University, which has been singled out for its handling of protests over the war in Gaza, enrolls more than 20,000 international students, a larger number than all but two other institutions.

While the administration's statement has unnerved colleges, it has baffled them, too. Decertifying a college, one longtime director of international-student services noted, is "cumbersome and rare."

The infrastructure around student visas — and colleges' administrative accountability — differs from that for other temporary, nonimmigrant visas. Since the September 11, 2001, terror attacks, colleges have had to register all international students in a federal database, the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System, or SEVIS, and are responsible for maintaining up-to-date information, such as student course loads and current addresses.

To enroll foreign students, institutions must be authorized by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Nearly 7,500 colleges, language programs, and secondary schools have such [certification](#).

A spokesperson for the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which oversees SEVIS, said 125 schools and colleges have "lost or voluntarily withdrawn" their certification during the current fiscal year. But experienced educators said it is relatively uncommon for the government to revoke such authority.

One administrator who handles student visas at her public university in the Midwest said she repeatedly alerted Homeland Security officials about a rash of students transferring out to a for-profit language school in New York despite being proficient in English. (The administrator asked not to be identified because of concerns about

speaking publicly on a politically sensitive issue.) It took years before the school was shut down, she said.

As a reporter, I have first-hand experience with the decertification process, which includes appeals. In 2011, my colleagues and I wrote a [lengthy investigative report](#) about fraudulent colleges that act as visa mills, exploiting loopholes in the student-visa system to bring foreign workers to the United States.

Nearly all of the students were from overseas at one of the institutions we reported on, the University of Northern Virginia, and the address the college listed for its accreditor was an auto-body repair shop. Four months after our article published, immigration authorities [raided](#) the university, but it would be two and a half more years before it lost approval to enroll international students.

To Ronald B. Cushing, director of international services at the University of Cincinnati, the idea that the Trump administration could unilaterally yank colleges' student-visa authority is a head-scratcher. "It's an official process," he said. "You don't just wake up one day and find that you're locked out of the SEVIS system."

It's unclear if the administration is drawing up plans to carry through on its threats. The ICE spokesperson said there were no requirements in current regulations for colleges to monitor the political and speech activities of student-visa holders and report them in the SEVIS system. Nor is the agency currently undertaking any actions to review institutions' certifications based on campus protest, the spokesperson said.

The administration's handling of student-visa revocations suggests that it may not be constrained by previous practice. The Midwestern administrator said she learned that several of her students' records had been terminated only when she checked the visa database at the suggestion of a colleague at another college. Homeland Security

officials typically notify colleges when it cancels their students' visas. "This is not normal at all," the administrator said.

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International-ed groups criticize crackdown

The sense that Trump administration policies that target international students have reached a "tipping point" has led some higher-education groups to speak out.

On Monday, the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, a coalition of more than 570 college leaders, released a [statement](#) condemning the detention of international and immigrant students and scholars.

"The government's actions and rhetoric create an atmosphere of fear, threaten academic freedom, chill free expression, and jeopardize the well-being of noncitizen members of our campus communities," the statement said, adding that such actions "appear to lack clear cause or be based on political speech or association and raise serious concerns about fairness, due process, freedom from arbitrary or discriminatory enforcement, and other constitutional protections."

Miriam Feldblum, the alliance's executive director, said the group's members were "concerned we were at a tipping point, and if we didn't speak up now, then when?"

NAFSA: Association of International Educators also put out a [statement](#) from its executive director, Fanta Aw. "Students have many options" when choosing where to study abroad, Aw said. "Losing international students' contributions will negatively impact U.S. engagement with the world, as well as the country's economic strength, security, and global competitiveness. These outcomes run counter to the administration's stated goal of making America safer, stronger, and more prosperous."

As my colleague Megan Zahneis has [written](#), associations have taken the lead in pushing back against efforts by the new Trump administration, criticizing policies and filing lawsuits when their campus members may be worried about the fallout of speaking up.

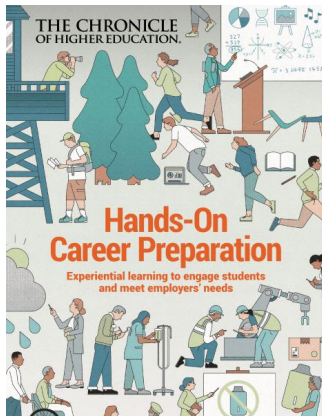
In other Trump-related developments:

- Several prominent professors are leaving American colleges for the University of Toronto. "It's more valuable to work in an international

context,” [said](#) Jason Stanley, a philosophy professor at Yale University. “There’s not an atmosphere of fear.”

- Colleges in Oregon and California can no longer allow students without permanent legal status access to some federally funded programs meant to help disadvantaged students earn degrees, according to a [recent decision](#) from the U.S. Department of Education. The Biden administration had granted the states waivers to include undocumented students in federal TRIO programs.
- Immigrant advocacy groups are challenging a [rule](#) that would require all noncitizens to register with the federal government.
- Could Germany be borrowing the American playbook? Immigration authorities in Berlin are moving to [deport](#) four young foreign residents because of their part in pro-Palestinian protests.
- A student activist at Cornell University [left the United States voluntarily](#) after a judge declined to immediately block the government from deporting him.

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Florida professor fired under foreign-influence law

New College of Florida fired a Chinese-language professor, citing a law that prohibits state colleges from hiring scholars and graduate assistants from “countries of concern.”

Kevin Wang, an instructor from China seeking asylum in the United States, had been teaching at the public liberal-arts college for two years before he was abruptly dismissed in mid-March. In a letter shared with the local public-radio station, [Suncoast Searchlight](#), New College officials told Wang, who was legally authorized to work, that he was being terminated because of his immigration status and country of origin, not for cause.

A state [foreign-influence law](#), approved in 2023, restricts Florida institutions from hiring people from seven countries of concern, including China, Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Russia, Syria, and Venezuela. A pair of graduate students and a professor have [sued](#) to block the law, saying it is discriminatory, unconstitutional, and overrides federal authority for immigration, national security, and foreign affairs.

Wang was hired as an adjunct instructor just weeks after the law — which forbids grants or agreements with universities in countries of concern without approval of the state’s Board of Governors — went into effect. His dismissal seems to have been prompted by actions to reappoint him.

Wang told *Suncoast Searchlight* that he was a professor in China but left because of political repression.

Florida is one of a number of states that have sought to more closely [police the foreign ties](#) of local colleges.

Around the globe

The U.S. House of Representatives has approved legislation that would lower the federal [foreign-gift reporting requirement](#) for colleges and mandate that they report all gifts and contracts from China and other countries of concern. Lawmakers passed a similar bill during the last congressional session, but it wasn't acted on by the Senate.

A new report looks at whether colleges' program offerings are [aligned](#) with international students' academic interests.

A strike by nontenured faculty members at Wellesley College has raised concerns that students may not receive full credit for incomplete coursework, potentially jeopardizing their [visa status](#).

Harvard has suspended a [research partnership](#) with Birzeit University, in the Palestinian West Bank.

Turkish police used pepper spray and a water cannon to break up [anti-government protests](#) on the campus of Middle East Technical University.

Students worry that they could be [forced to return home](#) to Afghanistan because of U.S. government-funding cuts to the American University of Afghanistan's campus-in-exile in Qatar.

Professors in Serbia have not been [paid](#) during nationwide protests.

The German Academic Exchange Service has cut more than a dozen federally funded programs for scholarships, research exchanges, and campus internationalization because of [cost concerns](#).

The University of Sussex has been fined a record £585,000, or \$758,000, by British regulators for failing to uphold [freedom of speech](#).

Some colleges in British Columbia have laid off as many as 10 percent of their professors because of a [funding crisis](#) precipitated by Canadian government limits on international-student enrollment.

Australian universities are working to beef up [academic and research ties](#) with Europe and Asia because of Trump administration cuts.

New webinar on cost-effective overseas recruitment

Join *The Chronicle* for a virtual forum on budget-conscious overseas student recruitment on Monday, April 7, at 2 p.m. ET. I'll be talking to a panel of international-enrollment veterans about the challenges of recruiting on a budget, where to target limited resources, and strategies for stretching your dollar.

The webinar is free, but registration is required. [Sign up here](#).

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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