
Latitudes: International enrollments are down. Trump's not the reason.

1 message

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Latitudes

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A worrisome decline

International enrollments have declined by 11 percent this year — and it's got little to do with President Trump.

There were 130,600 fewer foreign students in the United States in March 2025 as compared to March 2024, according to a [database](#) maintained by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

The drop-off — first [noted](#) by Chris R. Glass, a professor of educational leadership and higher education at Boston College — reflects a similar decrease in student-visa issuances [reported](#) by *The Chronicle* last fall. During the critical months of May to August, we found that the number of student, or F-1, visas awarded by American consulates around the world fell by 12.5 percent.

More than one million international students study in the United States.

Recent policy actions taken by the Trump administration — including [student-visa revocations](#) and [cuts in federal research funding](#), which could affect the large number of foreign doctoral students — have raised alarms about a potential chill on international enrollments.

But the declines are already here. As Glass notes in his blog, *Distributed Progress*, the lower enrollment totals have been consistent since the start of the current academic year, before Trump's election or inauguration.

The big story is India, with 28 percent fewer students. That's largely in keeping with the 34-percent drop in [visa issuances to Indian students](#) we spotted last summer.

India has now slipped from its position as the top sender of international students to the United States. China, which had a modest 3-percent increase in students over the past year, has regained the top spot.

The other big decline, of 21 percent, was in students from West African countries, such as Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal, which had been seen as a [promising new market](#) for American education.

Unsurprisingly, master's-degree programs, which enroll the vast majority of students from India, took the biggest hit. Enrollments at the bachelor's level held steady and fell slightly at the doctoral level.

This could spell trouble for colleges, as [increased overseas interest in master's programs](#) has helped make up for declines in domestic enrollment and in funding.

Glass speculates that a number of factors could be driving the decreases, including geopolitical tensions, the attractiveness of alternative destinations, and concerns about affordability. Indian students are typically more price sensitive than those from countries like China.

Another possible cause is visa denials. Global student-visa denials hit a 10-year high last fall, and West African and South Asian countries tend to have [higher-than-average rejection rates](#).

The question going forward, of course, is what President Trump's policy agenda means for the international appeal of American higher education. A [survey](#) conducted around the time of his inauguration by IDP Education, a company focused on international student recruitment, found that more than half of prospective students said their impression of this country had improved since the election. Another [survey](#), for Interstride, an edtech company, suggests that foreign-student sentiment about the United States is positive or neutral, but that many are considering alternative countries for study in case of American visa or immigration changes.

But Studyportals, a search platform for international students, reports that page views for American degree programs on its site had fallen by 38 percent by mid-March from the beginning of this year.

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Lawsuits challenge termination of foreign-student records

As student-visa revocations have [snowballed](#), several lawsuits have been filed challenging the government's authority to terminate international-student records and legal status.

Although the Trump administration has cast the visa sweep as part of its efforts to [combat antisemitism](#) on college campuses, a large number of the students stripped of their visas did not take part in protests over the war in Gaza or engage in other political activities. Instead, many have had their immigration documents terminated without clear justification or because of relatively minor legal infractions — which don't meet the bar for deportation, the lawsuits argue.

Unlike earlier [high-profile arrests](#) of campus activists, the government in recent days has quietly canceled student records in a national database known as the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System, or SEVIS, without notifying colleges, which are responsible for keeping students' immigration status up to date. Hundreds of international students at campuses across the country have been affected, and some have left the United States because of fears they could be detained.

At the [University of California at Los Angeles](#), the visas of six current students and six recent graduates were revoked. Seven [Ohio State University](#) students had their visas pulled.

The effort has sowed panic and confusion, leaving campus administrators scrambling to determine if their students have lost their visas and uncertain about how to advise them. "I'm just refreshing SEVIS like a madman," said one longtime international-student adviser who asked not to be named because of the sensitivity of the issue. "This isn't like anything I've ever seen before."

The abrupt terminations of status have left both colleges and students unclear about how to appeal the process. Some institutions have been providing students with legal resources and other support. The [University of Massachusetts at Amherst](#) set funds aside for "students who are adversely affected by changes in federal immigration" to help pay for lawyers, housing, and mental-health counseling. The president

of [Tufts University](#) filed a court declaration in support of a student who was detained. [Duke University](#) said it was arranging for students who had lost their visas to continue their studies from their home countries.

But the lawsuits said that the government overstepped its authority, arguing that the revocation of student visas, which allow students to enter the United States, does not also give officials the ability to terminate their record and legal status in the SEVIS database. In each case, the government did not have grounds to end students' status, the lawsuits said.

Federal regulations lay out certain circumstances that “constitute a failure to maintain status.” They include failing to maintain a full course of study, unauthorized employment, providing false information to federal officials, and being convicted of a “crime of violence” that carries a potential sentence of more than one year.

The Trump administration has also sought to tie protesters to terrorist organizations like Hamas and designate them as a threat to national security, invoking a little-used section of visa law. All the students who have filed legal challenges said they were not involved in political demonstrations.

One [lawsuit](#), in federal court in central California, was brought by an unnamed student athlete from a predominantly Muslim country. The student's only criminal history is a minor misdemeanor nonalcohol-related driving conviction, which does not meet the definition of a crime of violence and did not come with a sentence of more than a year.

The SEVIS terminations appear “to be designed to coerce students ... into abandoning their studies and ‘self-deporting’ despite not violating their status,” the filing said, adding that if the government believes a student is deportable, “it has the authority to initiate removal proceedings and make its case in court. It cannot, however, misuse

SEVIS to circumvent the law, strip students of status, and drive them out of the country without process.”

A [second case](#), also in California, involves a recent graduate working as a software engineer through a special program that allows students to work in the United States for up to three years after they earn their degree. The graduate, who is also from a majority-Muslim country, received probation for a minor misdemeanor conviction. The graduate informed federal authorities of the conviction, the complaint notes, and the government “twice approved immigration benefits applications for plaintiff because their minor criminal offense did not render them ineligible for status nor removable from the U.S.”

A [third lawsuit](#) was brought in New Hampshire on behalf of Xiaotian Liu, a doctoral student from China at Dartmouth College. Liu has never committed a crime — “even a traffic violation, as he does not drive,” the filing said — although he was temporarily not allowed to enter the country in 2022 following a Covid-related gap year because his student-visa record had not been properly reactivated. The termination last week of his visa record means that Liu cannot work as a graduate research assistant, putting his “education, research, and career trajectory at risk.”

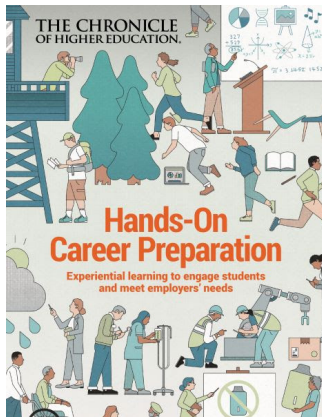
Higher-education groups have requested a briefing from the Trump administration on student-visa revocations.

In a [letter](#) to Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem, the associations ask for more information and clarity about recent policy actions, including increased screening of international students’ [social-media accounts](#), which was ordered by Rubio last week. The letter was spearheaded by the American Council on Education and signed by 15 other groups.

The Chronicle wants to hear about how visa revocations and other government actions are affecting your campus. Email me at

karin.fischer@chronicle.com or contact me confidentially on [Signal](#).

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News from Capitol Hill

Republican lawmakers have introduced [legislation](#) that would end optional practical training, or OPT, the popular work program for recent international graduates of American colleges.

“The OPT program completely undercuts American workers, particularly higher-skilled workers and recent college graduates, by giving employers a tax incentive to hire inexpensive, foreign labor under the guise of student training,” said Rep. Paul Gosar, a Republican from Arizona who has previously authored similar legislation.

Gosar’s bill is the latest in a series of legislative and legal challenges to the program, which permits recent international graduates to work in the United States for up to three years. Supporters of OPT said it is key to attracting foreign students who value earning work experience along with their degree.

A [separate proposed bill](#) in the U.S. House of Representatives would revoke the visas of students who act in support of a foreign terrorist organization.

Visa headaches may deter foreign researchers from travel to the U.S.

Difficulties securing visas have prevented four in 10 foreign researchers and scientists from participating in some professional activities in the United States, according to a [survey](#) conducted by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine.

Some have shifted their international academic collaboration away from the United States or are considering doing so because of visa headaches, the survey found.

It's more complicated to apply for an American visa than for permission to travel to other countries, half of the survey's 1,465 respondents said, citing barriers such as inefficiency, lack of transparency, and greater documentation requirements. That could dissuade first-time applicants, those unfamiliar with the American immigration system, or those who lack institutional support.

The survey was conducted last September, before Trump administration policy actions and statements soured overseas academics about coming to the United States or made them scared to do so. Some foreign professors have said they are [rethinking travel](#) for conferences or research. At least one institution, the University of Montreal, has issued [guidelines](#) for students and staff members going to the United States, including urging them to exercise caution and

reminding them that customs officials can check phones and computers of visitors entering the country.

Still, nearly all those surveyed said taking part in professional activities in the United States was important to their career.

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Around the globe

Indiana University at Bloomington was reportedly investigating a cybersecurity professor for [unreported research funding from China](#) before FBI raids on his home. Xiaofeng Wang and his wife have disappeared, but their lawyer said that the couple was safe.

A player on Duke's men's basketball team, which recently made a run to the Final Four, could face possible deportation after the U.S. Department of State [announced](#) it was revoking all visas of South Sudanese passport holders.

Houston Community College canceled a trip for honors students to [London](#) because of immigration and visa concerns.

The Texas Senate unanimously approved a [bill](#) that would prohibit public colleges from accepting funding, such as gifts and contracts, from foreign “adversary” countries. The state’s governor, Greg Abbott, a Republican, had previously issued an [executive order](#) limiting higher education’s overseas ties.

Clark University, in Massachusetts, will end its degree program in [Francophone studies](#) as part of money-saving efforts because of enrollment declines.

A former Chinese doctoral student in Britain has been [convicted](#) of drugging and assaulting 10 women, many of them fellow international students, and 23 more have come forward with allegations of sexual assault.

A leading presidential candidate in Poland has called for all of the country's colleges to start charging [tuition](#).

Despite crackdowns on dissent, students on Russian campuses are mounting a [quiet resistance](#) to war efforts.

Iranian universities are being hit with an [exodus](#) of faculty members leaving the country.

Sixty percent of top engineering graduates in India don't have [job offers](#) by the time they finish their degrees.

A half-dozen Australian universities have closed [Confucius Institutes](#), the Chinese-funded language and cultural centers, on their campuses.

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