

Latitudes: The Trump administration did a mass cancellation of student-visa records. But why?

1 message

Karin Fischer <newsletter@newsletter.chronicle.com>

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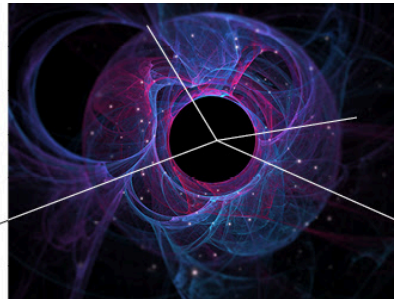
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Latitudes

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Students remain anxious even after visa records are restored

The Trump administration has done an about-face, reversing its action to terminate the legal status of thousands of international students.

But the [announcement](#), made during a hearing on one of dozens of legal challenges to the administration's efforts, does not close the chapter on what for many has been a frightening and unnerving saga. It remains unclear what prompted the mass cancellation of records in a federal student-visa database. And immigration officials have said they are working on a new system for reviewing and terminating the records of international students and scholars — meaning that the current reprieve may be temporary.

“As far as students and families go, their trust has been broken,” said Fanta Aw, executive director of NAFSA: Association of International Educators.

The Trump administration had characterized the student-visa crackdown as part of a campaign against [campus antisemitism](#). However, except for a few initial high-profile [arrests](#) of pro-Palestinian activists, the larger wave of status revocations appear tied to often-minor, or even dismissed, legal infractions, like traffic or parking violations. Some students said they had no encounters with law enforcement and no idea why their legal right to study in the United States had been rescinded.

In recent days, judges in cases across the country have issued emergency orders temporarily blocking changes to students' legal status. [Polls](#) suggest a majority of Americans oppose efforts to deport international students.

In a statement read in court on Friday, a government lawyer said that students' immigration status “will remain active or shall be reactivated if not currently active” in the student-visa records system, known as the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System, or SEVIS. The lawyer also said the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, which

oversees SEVIS, would not modify students' records "solely based" on information from a national criminal database.

But the fallout remains. Although the government began restoring the more than 4,700 terminated records late Thursday, the process is slow going and tedious, meaning that some may still be waiting for reinstatement. Many students have missed classes because of uncertainty about their status or fear of being arrested, just weeks before the end of the semester. Recent graduates taking part in a work program known as optional practical training may have lost their jobs. And some students left the country, or self-deported, meaning that they could have to reapply for new visas.

"There's a real cost to this, and that hasn't gone away," Aw said.

Also of concern, while student records have been reactivated, they continue to show the previous termination. Past terminations could be a black mark against students who apply for green cards or otherwise try to change their immigration status, said Miriam Feldblum, chief executive of the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration.

The government's U-turn "does not erase the harm to students or institutions," Feldblum said. The administration "upended readily accepted practices and established norms, and we're still in a type of limbo."

The Presidents' Alliance, a coalition of college presidents and chancellors, has filed its own [lawsuit](#), arguing that students were stripped of their legal status without warning, explanation, or ability to respond. The group plans to continue with the lawsuit, Feldblum said.

Lawmakers are still asking questions, too. On Monday, a group of 35 Democratic U.S. senators sent a [letter](#) to Trump administration officials, calling the revocations "unlawful" and asking for detailed information about the administration's decision-making and the

demographics of students who had their legal status or their visas terminated.

They also cautioned the administration about its plans to put in place a new student-visa policy. “Any such changes must be consistent with applicable statutes, including requirements for notice with respect to changes that would deprive a student of their status and ability to live and study in the United States and place them at risk of detention,” said the letter, spearheaded by Sen. Richard J. Durbin of Illinois, the Senate’s second-ranking Democrat.

The Department of Homeland Security did not respond to questions from *The Chronicle* about what problems the administration was hoping to fix with a new policy or about whether stakeholders would be involved in the process. Typically, regulatory changes are preceded by the publication of proposed rules and opportunities for public comment.

Meanwhile, the aftereffects of the crackdown could continue to be felt by current international students considering travel outside of the United States over the summer break and by prospective students weighing whether to attend an American college.

Harvard University told incoming international undergraduates they could also accept admission to a second, non-American college as a “backup plan.”

In an email obtained by [The Harvard Crimson](#), college officials said they were aware of students’ concerns and were “doing everything possible to enroll the students we have admitted.”

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Order tries to block in-state tuition to undocumented students

The Trump administration is threatening to penalize states that offer in-state tuition to undocumented students.

An [executive order](#) issued on Monday directed federal agencies to block the enforcement of state and local laws that “provide in-state higher-education tuition to aliens but not to out-of-state American citizens.” Public colleges typically charge lower tuition to state residents.

Twenty-four states and Washington, D.C., extend in-state tuition benefits to undocumented students who meet certain requirements, such as those who have graduated from high schools in the state. Of those states, 19 and Washington, D.C., also provide access to state financial aid, according to the [Presidents' Alliance](#).

Nine states explicitly block undocumented students from receiving in-state tuition, including three that prohibit them from enrolling in all or some public colleges.

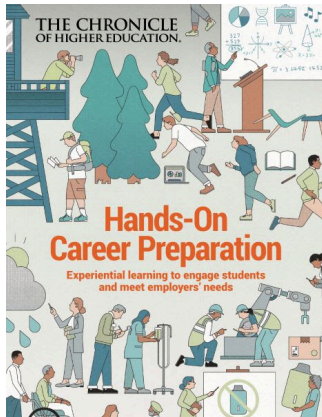
In a [fact sheet](#), the administration said such state measures “unlawfully prioritize” noncitizens, favoring them over Americans who are residents of other states. The order was one of several signed on Monday dealing with immigration.

But Feldblum, of the Presidents' Alliance, said states have the authority to set their own tuition policies and may do so to meet state goals such as expanding access and meeting work-force needs.

In other news, a State Department [reorganization plan](#) released last week includes the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, allaying concerns that the administration might try to eliminate government exchange programs, like the flagship Fulbright.

A leaked internal memo had suggested that the administration might move to [zero out](#) all funding for State Department educational and cultural programming.

In a [social-media post](#), Mark Overmann, executive director of the Alliance for International Exchange, called the bureau's inclusion in the reorganization good news but said that colleges and other groups that run international exchanges should be prepared to fight funding cuts that could be included in the president's budget proposal. “We know there is strong bipartisan support in Congress,” Overmann said of exchange programs, “and we'll be pushing hard.”



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Administration to expand scrutiny of colleges' foreign funds

In [last week's issue of Latitudes](#), I reported that the U.S. Department of Education had opened an investigation into overseas gifts and contracts to [Harvard](#), and posed the question: Are other colleges next?

The answer came that same afternoon, when the president directed his administration to tighten requirements that colleges disclose foreign funding, one of a [flurry of executive orders](#) dealing with higher education. (Other orders focused on accreditation and historically Black colleges.)

The goal of the order, "[Transparency Regarding Foreign Influence at American Universities](#)," was to "end the secrecy surrounding foreign funds in American educational institutions, protect the marketplace of ideas from propaganda sponsored by foreign governments, and safeguard America's students and research from foreign exploitation." Colleges that fail to comply could have other federal funds revoked.

Also last week, the Education Department [announced](#) it was investigating a second institution, the University of California at Berkeley, saying its foreign-money disclosures may be incomplete or inaccurate. An administration official later told [Politico](#) that Berkeley would receive “a handshake” if it made a good-faith effort to comply with the review.

Just what new requirements might look like is unclear. The order directs the Education Department to take steps to mandate that colleges report more details about foreign funding, including the source and purpose of overseas gifts and contracts. Congress is also considering lowering the amount of funding that must be reported.

Around the globe

Texas, the first state in the country to offer in-state tuition to undocumented students, is considering [repealing](#) that benefit.

Students at Occidental College have gone on a [hunger strike](#) to press the California institution to divest from weapons manufacturers with ties to Israel and to offer more support to international students, including pro bono legal support.

A leading Canadian higher-education association is urging the newly elected government to develop “[a bold, coordinated plan](#)” to attract top international students and support their success.

Free-speech organizations are encouraging British universities to adopt policies of [institutional neutrality](#).

Namibia will do away with [tuition fees](#).

A new publication series will examine structural, operational, programmatic, and curricular best practices for [community colleges](#) around the world.

Could the quality of international students' [writing](#) benefit from using artificial intelligence?

Coming up: A new webinar on international education

International officers are in the hot seat. Enrollment pressures in the United States mean college leaders expect more international students to fill seats and bolster the bottom line. But a new Trump administration could make coming here a harder sell. How are international officers navigating this period? Outside of enrollment and political headwinds, what are the less-discussed issues on their minds? And with potential pressures growing, how can these administrators help their staff members manage the expectations and uncertainties?

Join *The Chronicle* on Wednesday, May 7, at 2 p.m. ET for a virtual forum on the evolving and challenging role of the senior international officer. [Sign up here](#).

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