

Latitudes: International students are again threatened with deportation

1 message

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Latest scrutiny of foreign students focuses on OPT

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security is threatening a fresh round of deportations of international students, this time aimed at visa holders who are late in reporting their employment on optional practical training, the postgraduate work program.

[Notices](#) sent to students late last week gave them 15 days to update their records, warning that “failure to take corrective action may result in the initiation of immigration proceedings to remove you from the United States.”

It’s unclear how many students received letters, but concern was widespread enough by Friday that NAFSA: Association of International Educators posted an [advisory](#) on the issue. The Department of Homeland Security did not respond to questions from *The Chronicle*.

The latest action follows the [mass cancellation](#) of thousands of international students’ legal status this spring, often for minor legal infractions. After a wave of lawsuits challenging the terminations, the Trump administration [reversed course](#), reinstating student records. But the administration said it was putting in place a new policy that would expand immigration officials’ authority to review and cancel student records — although updated procedures have not been officially announced.

The current notices were sent to visa holders taking part in optional practical training, or OPT, a program that allows recent graduates to remain in the United States for one to three years to work in a field related to their studies. Because OPT is seen as an extension of their education, participants remain on student visas.

After foreign students are approved for OPT, they have 90 days to find a job and to add their employment information to a federal student-visa database, the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System,

or SEVIS. Without the employer information, it appears in SEVIS that a student is unemployed.

While failure to keep information current — such as address, name, or employment changes — is a violation of students' visa status, a half-dozen college administrators, lawyers, and immigration experts who spoke with *The Chronicle* said they had not heard of cases of students' SEVIS records being terminated because of that kind of reporting mistake. Students may miss the 90-day deadline amid the whirlwind of graduation and starting a new job. Others may simply run out of time to find an American employer to [hire](#) them.

“Threatening deportation — that’s just unprecedented,” said one international-student adviser who asked not to be named because she doesn’t have college approval to comment publicly.

Emily Neumann, a partner with Reddy Newman Brown, an immigration law firm, said she has not known the government to take action against students who accrue unemployment time. Instead, she said the issue typically comes up only when students apply for a work visa or to extend their OPT, which is available to those in STEM majors.

Although the Department of Homeland Security can terminate student records, the decision to revoke visas is the purview of the U.S. Department of State. In a written statement, a State Department spokesperson said that the agency “cannot preview future visa-related decisions, which are made on a case-by-case basis, based on the individual facts relevant to the case.” The statement referred questions about potential removals of students from the country to Homeland Security..

A [nearly identical letter](#) was sent out in 2020, during the first Trump administration. In that instance, however, college officials were notified of the alert. This time, colleges said they only learned of the issue

when contacted by students, and, as of Tuesday, no broadcast message had been posted on the department's [website](#).

Experts who spoke with *The Chronicle* said they did not know of students who were penalized following the 2020 letter.

The Department of Homeland Security does have the ability to terminate student records automatically when students hit the 90-day unemployment limit, but it has not previously activated that capacity. Officials had told colleges that they would be notified if the tool was turned on, one expert said.

It's unclear if that tool was used, or if the department audited SEVIS records in another way. In the case of the earlier status revocations, student information was run against a national criminal database, department lawyers said in court.

The Trump administration had characterized that crackdown as part of a campaign against campus antisemitism.

Neumann, the immigration lawyer, said she was concerned that the new notices may be part of a broader campaign to expel international students after the administration's earlier attempt suffered legal setbacks.

Officials seem to be looking for "any little thing a student does wrong" in order to terminate their legal status, Neumann said. "I wouldn't be surprised if this was the next step to cause fear and anxiety among international students or to get them to leave the country."

OPT, while little known outside of international education, has been a [target](#) of critics of expanded immigration who say it's a back-door way to hire foreign workers. President Trump has sent mixed messages: During his first term, he [threatened](#) to curtail or cancel the program, but during last year's campaign, he called it a "[priority](#)" to keep "brilliant" foreign graduates in the United States.

About 243,000 international students, or one in five student-visa holders, in the United States is currently taking part in OPT.

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Congress urges Duke to close China campus

The chairmen of two committees in the U.S. House of Representatives are urging Duke University to close its campus in China, calling it a national-security risk.

Duke Kunshan University, located outside of Shanghai, is “advancing China’s military and technological ambitions at the expense of the American taxpayer,” the lawmakers write in a [letter](#) to Vincent Price, Duke’s president.

“Given the Chinese Communist Party’s well-documented efforts to exploit U.S. academic openness, this partnership creates a direct pipeline between U.S. innovation and China’s military-industrial complex.”

The letter was sent by Rep. John Moolenaar, chairman of the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party, and Rep. Tim Walberg, chairman of the House Education and Workforce Committee, both of whom are Republicans from Michigan.

A university spokesman confirmed that Duke had received the letter, saying in a written statement, “Duke respects Congress’ important oversight role and will work to further educate Congress about Duke’s global-education mission.” The university did not respond to questions about whether administrators were re-evaluating the overseas campus.

The letter details lawmakers’ “serious concerns,” including the participation of Chinese students at Duke Kunshan in military training and relationships that researchers and graduates have with companies with ties to the Chinese military. That’s troubling because students and scholars often spend time at Duke’s home campus, in North Carolina, where they can “gain access” to research funded by the U.S. government, the letter said.

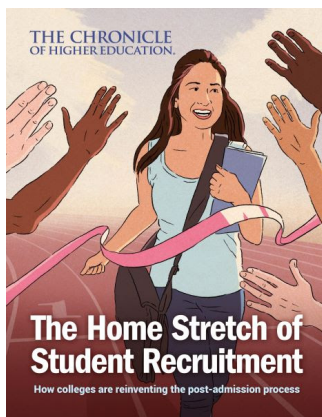
The chairmen were also critical of a trip to China in which Duke students were pressured to speak with local media and say positive things about the country. One student wrote about the experience in [The Assembly](#), a North Carolina publication that has been a journalism partner of *The Chronicle*.

Duke Kunshan, which first admitted students in 2015, is a [collaboration](#) with a Chinese institution, Wuhan University, as required under Chinese law. A handful of other American colleges, such as Kean and New York Universities, also have campuses in China.

Under congressional scrutiny, four other institutions — [Georgia Institute of Technology](#), Oakland University, the [University of California at Berkeley](#), and the [University of Michigan](#) — have severed relationships with Chinese partners. Duke Kunshan, however, is the most comprehensive partnership to come under the microscope.

Moolenaar and Walberg are also among several House committee leaders who sent separate [letters](#) to the State University of New York and the University of California systems to watch out for Chinese influence in small-business programs often operated in partnership with colleges.

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U.S. House investigates Harvard's ties to China and Iran

Congress is joining in Washington's pressure campaign against Harvard University.

Moolenaar and Walberg, joined by Rep. Elise Stefanik of New York, a top Republican, accused Harvard of having foreign partnerships with entities tied to human-rights abuses or that are national-security threats. In a [letter](#) sent Monday to Harvard's president, Alan Garber, the lawmakers said they were opening an investigation and gave the university two weeks to respond to a laundry list of demands.

The letter says that Harvard hosted and trained members of a Chinese paramilitary group involved in China's repression of its Uyghur Muslim minority and worked with researchers at Chinese universities that have military ties on research funded by the U.S. Department of Defense. They also questioned collaborative research on organ transplant-related research, pointing to charges of organ harvesting by the Chinese government. And they said the university's participation in China-based projects funded by Iranian sources may violate American sanctions against Iran.

A spokesman confirmed that Harvard received the letter but made no comment on the inquiry.

The 14-page, footnoted letter includes multiple requests for documents and communications with Chinese partners, information about funding from China and Iran to individual researchers, and details about Harvard's research-security protections.

Harvard is already in a tense standoff with the Trump administration, which [terminated](#) billions of dollars in federal grants after the university refused to agree to a series of demands that would have given the government far-reaching powers to shape admissions, diversity programming, and other campus operations. In April, the university filed a lawsuit against the government, protesting financial and regulatory penalties.

Catch up at NAFSA

I'll be among the speakers at next week's NAFSA conference in San Diego:

- On Thursday, May 29, at noon PT, I'll be talking about global education's future at the NAFSA pavilion in the expo hall.
- I'll be part of a discussion on international-student career success on Friday, May 30, at 11:30 a.m. in room 33ABC.

If you can't make those sessions, I will be at the conference all week. If you spot me, I'd love to chat.

What sessions and speakers are you most looking forward to at NAFSA? I appreciate suggestions for subjects to cover and panels to attend (your own included). I'm at karin.fischer@chronicle.com.

Around the globe

The state of Florida is [challenging](#) a judge's ruling that temporarily blocked a [law](#) that prevents public colleges from hiring graduate students and scholars from China and other "countries of concern."

Carnegie Mellon University has renewed an [agreement](#) to operate an overseas campus in Qatar for another decade. Georgetown University recently signed a similar extension, but Texas A&M University said last year that it is [closing](#) its Middle Eastern campus.

More than 5,000 higher-education jobs in [Canada](#) have been cut since the government imposed international-student caps.

Serbian academics and students are pushing the European Union to [intervene](#) after the country's leaders said they were limiting the amount of time scholars can spend on research.

Israel's education minister has threatened to [revoke funding](#) to Hebrew University and Tel Aviv University because of student events commemorating the expulsion of Palestinians from Israel in the 1940s.

Nearly 100 students were arrested at Turkey's Bogazici University after they [protested](#) an Islamic preacher's invitation to campus.

A governing body in India is calling on universities to [enroll more international students](#) by creating additional seats.

Cuts to government subsidies could imperil [Japan's private colleges](#), which educate about 80 percent of students enrolled in higher education.

Thanks for reading. I always welcome your feedback and ideas for future reporting, so drop me a line at karin.fischer@chronicle.com or message me confidentially at [Signal](#). You can also connect with me on [X](#), or [LinkedIn](#), or [Bluesky](#). If you like this newsletter, please share it with colleagues and friends. They can [sign up here](#).

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