



## **Opinion**

### Letters to the Editor

# We're international students at Harvard. We're afraid to write this. But we have to speak up.

Three student leaders on Trump's attempts to throw them out of the country.

Yesterday at 3:24 p.m. EDT

Writing this letter carries a great deal of personal risk for all of us. The ordeals of [Rumeysa Ozturk](#) and [Mahmoud Khalil](#) make clear that the Trump administration does not hesitate to snatch international students off the streets and put them in detention facilities for speaking up. But we refuse to silence ourselves at a time when our community is under attack. We can't afford to be silent. Neither can Harvard.

For each of us, the day we received acceptance letters from Harvard was possibly the happiest of our lives. We were heading to a university and country that offer endless opportunities, to the very center of free thought and innovation. Both the U.S. and Harvard offered something that was not available to us at home. We came here because we love this country, America's founding values and its openness to people with different backgrounds.

Now, we are caught in a battle between the White House and Harvard. On Thursday, the Trump administration escalated an ongoing dispute with the university by revoking Harvard's ability to enroll international students. Though a federal judge [put a temporary hold](#) on the Department of Homeland Security's ability to revoke Harvard's certification, if the order stands, international students — more than a quarter of the undergraduate student body — will not be able to return to campus in the fall. Thousands of students like us will see their dreams shattered. They come here to become physicians, scientists, engineers and teachers. And without Harvard's ability to bring together the smartest people from around the world, Harvard will simply not be Harvard anymore.

We should make no mistake about President Donald Trump's strategy: He is trying to install himself as provost of our university. He seemingly wants to dictate who can be admitted, what classes can be taught and which professors should be fired. Disagreeing with the current administration, whether an economics professor opposing tariffs or a medical researcher debunking anti-vaccine myths, could lead to punishment. In Trump's world, there is no such thing as an independent institution.

To this end, he is using us international students as poker chips in this authoritarian game. He is trying to pressure Harvard by putting our futures at risk.

But among Trump's victims will be the U.S. itself. Across labs, research centers and classrooms in American universities, domestic and international students and researchers work hand in hand. Deporting thousands of people and deterring others from coming to the U.S. to study and conduct research will severely impact America's place at the forefront of innovation.

The uncertainty the administration is sowing is deeply damaging. Even if the Trump administration backs down now or loses in court, it will take many years for American universities to regain the trust of students around the world, who see themselves as unwelcome by the federal government and are unsure of whether they will be able to finish their degrees.

Harvard simply has no choice but to fight back with all available tools. Trump is trying to give the university the illusion of a choice: give in to some of my demands, or I will deport all of your international students. But we know that Trump is a highly predictable poker player. If we start to give in — say, by handing over the names of students who have been involved in protests or firing professors — he is going to come back for even more. We have no choice but to take the fight now, or we will have surrendered our independence.

But we can't take this fight alone. We need the support of universities and students across America to show that his attempts at intimidation will not work. We need Republicans in Congress, many of whom are graduates of Harvard, to oppose Trump's actions. We need all Americans to resist Trump's attacks on the very core of American values: the right to free speech.

Doing nothing would be a shame to the ideals and values of the country we came to and believe in. Now more than ever, we all need to stand up for them.

**Abdullah Shahid Sial**, *Lahore, Pakistan*

**Leo Gerdén**, *Stockholm*

*Sial is a sophomore at Harvard University and co-president of the Harvard Undergraduate Association. Gerdén is a senior, Molden is a sophomore, and both are co-founders of Students for Freedom, a coalition of international and American students speaking up against the Trump administration's attacks on higher education.*

### **What readers are saying**

The comments overwhelmingly express support for the international students at Harvard, highlighting their courage in speaking out against the Trump administration's policies. Many commenters emphasize the positive contributions of international students to American universities... [Show more](#)

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