

INTERNATIONAL

Colleges Across U.S. Fear Chill on Enrollments of Foreign Students

By [Karin Fischer](#) May 28, 2025



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The opening session of the world's largest international-education conference had just begun on Tuesday morning

when across the San Diego convention-center hall, Slack messages began to ping and alarmed emails thudded into inboxes.

Amid the welcoming remarks, many of the 8,000 attendees at the conference of NAFSA: Association of International Educators were learning of the latest news to shake the field: The U.S. Department of State had [suspended](#) all new student-visa appointments — at the height of student-visa application season. Seventy percent of all student visas issued last year, nearly 270,000, were awarded during the peak summer months.

“It’s not an accident it happened now,” said Fanta Aw, NAFSA’s chief executive and executive director, said of the pause, which the State Department said is needed to put in place a plan to screen all foreign students’ social-media accounts.

“I think the end goal is to shake up higher ed and create fear,” Aw said.

In San Diego, the mood was at once dispirited and defiant, dazed and dismayed. Nearly 500 people packed an early morning session on Wednesday on potential legal and regulatory changes. “I just gave up on keeping these slides up to date. The type keeps getting smaller and smaller,” said Steve Springer, director of regulatory practice liaison for NAFSA, who was one of the speakers.

The visa-interview pause, Springer told the crowd, could be “catastrophic or a horribly timed bump in the road” if it is quickly lifted. A internal State Department cable sent to embassies and consulates said no additional appointments should be scheduled until further guidance is issued, which is “anticipated in the coming days.” Previously booked appointments seemed to be largely honored on Wednesday.

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In addition to sessions, NAFSA attendees flocked to receptions and networking events hosted by colleges, international-education companies, and foreign delegations. Some said the gathering gave them a welcome feeling of solidarity, despite the mounting challenges.

“Being here is kind of like collective therapy,” said one international-student adviser queuing up at the Parq Nightclub Tuesday night to get into the always-boisterous Brazil Party. Like many conference-goers, she asked that a reporter not use her name because of political sensitivities. “I’m from Texas,” she said. For the next few hours, she hoped to dance the day’s stresses away.

For international education, there has been a lot of stress to absorb. Earlier in the spring, thousands of students had their legal status abruptly [terminated](#) by the government, often for minor legal infractions, although after a wave of lawsuits, officials reversed course.

The visa-interview suspension capped a week of bad news: The nominee to oversee the student-visa system vowed to end work authorization for recent international graduates,

a move that could seriously dent the appeal of American colleges. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security warned foreign students who had not updated their employment records that they could face deportation.

And the Trump administration took the unprecedented step of [revoking](#) Harvard University's authority to enroll international students as part of an all-fronts showdown with one of the nation's most prestigious institutions. Other colleges could be next, Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem said in announcing the decision: "Let this serve as a warning to all universities and academic institutions across the country."

(Harvard filed suit, and a judge granted an emergency restraining order blocking the university's decertification.)

The weaponization of the student-visa system against Harvard rattled one long-serving senior international administrator. Terminating a college's ability to host foreign students typically only occurs if an institution closes, makes significant changes to its academic programs, and or has abused the student-visa system.

But it was the suspension of visa appointments that caught the attention of the president and provost at the administrator's private institution. Throughout Tuesday, they peppered the administrator with emails about what steps to take and how to reassure several hundred incoming international students who could be affected by the freeze.

Increased awareness by campus leaders of the challenges facing international education was a sort of grim silver lining to Tuesday's news, the administrator said. When the government targeted Harvard, "it was about them. Now it's about us."

Tuition paid by international students is a crucial revenue source for many colleges, and they are a major talent pipeline for graduate programs, particularly in the sciences.

The NAFSA conference itself reflects the big business that international education has become — the convention center's cavernous expo hall was filled with booths offering international-recruitment assistance, evacuation services for study abroad, specialized software for tracking overseas

travel, and more. College degrees are now one of the United States' [largest service exports](#).

“Our president is a businessman — he should get that,” said Balaji Krishnan, vice provost for international affairs at the University of Memphis. “These are the easiest export dollars we can get as a country.”

One of the biggest challenges, he said, was the uncertainty created by the administration. A “glass three-quarters-full guy,” Krishnan said he hoped that the visa-interview freeze would be unfrozen soon. “My biggest concern is that it put in the minds of all of these students, when is the next shoe going to drop?”

Many conference-goers were asking the same question. “What’s next, the four horsemen of the apocalypse,” one joked.

Springer, the NAFSA regulatory director, ran through a laundry list of possible executive orders and regulatory changes still to come, including funding cuts for academic exchanges and reforms to optional practical training, the

program that allows international students to work in the United States for one to three years after graduation. The administration could also revive ideas that were proposed but never enacted during the president's first term, like a time limit on student visas.

Given the [uneasy relationship](#) during Trump's first four years in office, NAFSA and other international-education groups had been bracing for his return to office and even doing scenario planning. Still, said Rachel Banks, NAFSA's senior director for public policy and legislative strategy, "the pause on visa interviews was not something on our bingo card."

Many conference-goers said they felt flattened by the succession of administration actions. And there was one more: "The U.S. will begin revoking visas of Chinese students, including those with connections to the Chinese Communist Party or studying in critical fields," Secretary of State Marco Rubio said in a [social-media post](#) late Wednesday afternoon.

“Please,” one woman said during another standing-room session on policy and advocacy, “tell us what we can do.”

Some opposition campaigns have had impact — the State Department lifted a [funding freeze](#) after educators sent some 25,000 letters to Congress, asking lawmakers to intervene.

But given that many directives have not come through normal channels, “it’s a question of what action to take and when is the right moment to take action,” said Mark Overmann, executive director of the Alliance for International Exchange.

Representatives of federal government agencies, like the Departments of Homeland Security and State, typically hold question-and-answer sessions during the annual meeting. Since the original conference program was released several months ago, planned government speakers pulled out, including some who canceled as recently as Friday.

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In a written statement on the visa-interview pause, a State Department spokesperson said that “the Trump administration is focused on protecting our nation and our citizens by upholding the highest standards of national security and public safety through our visa process.”

In the absence of concrete information, colleges and recruitment providers said they felt at a loss to advise current students or reassure those who had expected to get visas for the fall. Roger N. Brindley, president of Acumen, which does international consulting to American colleges, called a visa “a statement of trust. It’s going to take time to wrestle back that trust.”

That trust could extend to colleges’ global partnerships. “What do we do when Brand USA is on fire?” said Kirsten Feddersen, vice president of partnerships for IDP, an international-recruitment company. Colleges, she said during a panel on navigating geopolitical shifts, would need to find ways to distinguish themselves as institutions.

Although 45 percent of this year’s conference attendees are from overseas, there are fears that the policies of an “America First” president could diminish the United States’ desirability as a global collaborator and undermine its preeminence as a destination for top foreign students. “It’s a real possibility and an unfortunate one” that global education and exchanges could bypass a less-hospitable

United States, said Francisco J. Marmolejo, a longtime international educator and president of the Qatar Foundation's higher-education arm.

Pico Iyer, an author whose remarks opened the conference, urged attendees not to be discouraged despite the current headwinds. "The world right now is swinging like a mad pendulum," he said. "Don't be distracted by the moment. Try to step back."

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