

# International students scared to leave U.S., return to school after travel ban

More than 24,000 international students from the affected countries studied in the U.S. as recently as the 2023-2024 academic year.

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As President Donald Trump signaled plans for a new travel ban after taking office, the family of a 19-year-old Venezuelan student at the Savannah College of Art and Design decided she shouldn't go home for the summer. She wasn't sure she'd be let back in the United States if she left.

The possibility hung in the air for months, but nothing happened. Her parents, in Caracas, started planning to fly her back.

Then the White House announced Wednesday that it would restrict entry to the U.S. by nationals of 12 countries, with partial restrictions on seven others — including Venezuela.

The art school student immediately scrapped her plans to go home — or to any other country. She canceled a getaway to Costa Rica booked for the next day and instead plans to stay in Miami with her sister, who is also on a student visa. Her bags are still packed.

“I came here looking for better opportunities than the ones I could find back home,” said the student, who, like some other international students interviewed by The Washington Post, spoke on the condition of anonymity or withheld their full identities because they fear losing their visas. “I came here to learn from the best and contribute as much as I can. I haven't done anything wrong, but they're treating us like we're some sort of terrorists.”

While the White House says Trump's order would not affect current visa holders, it has plunged foreign students into uncertainty. Many colleges, bracing for a possible ban, have been warning international students for months to avoid nonessential foreign travel due to fears they could suddenly be unable to reenter the country.

Now that a ban has arrived — during summer break for many schools — some students are scrambling to get back from abroad before the restrictions take effect Monday. Others in the U.S. worry they won't be able to return if they leave. Data from the 2023-2024 academic year show there were about 24,000 international students in the United States from the countries listed in the ban, which include many African and Muslim-majority nations.

In his executive order, Trump said the travel ban was based on “foreign policy, national security, and counterterrorism goals” and applies to people who are currently abroad and do not have a valid visa. White House spokeswoman Abigail Jackson said that visas issued before Monday, when the order takes effect, will not be revoked and holders can enter the country “as long as there are no other reasons that would prevent entry.”

Students and experts are wary of the ban's scope — and about how it will be implemented at airports and borders, and whether efforts to obtain or renew visas will be disrupted. In late May, the State Department suspended foreign students' visa appointments as it prepared to expand screening of applicants' social media accounts, The Post reported.

“Prospective students will be forced to abandon their educational dreams, faculty members will no longer be able to effectively collaborate internationally, and families will be kept apart,” Barbara Snyder, president of the Association of American Universities, said in a [statement](#). “These bans send a message to all foreign nationals, even those not immediately affected by them: You are not welcome here.”

## By the numbers

In 2017, during his first term in office, Trump enacted a travel ban targeting predominantly Muslim countries — sparking protests and legal challenges. The White House’s latest travel ban comes as part of its broader effort to reduce [immigration](#) and align higher education with Trump’s political agenda.

Wednesday’s order bars the entry of individuals from Afghanistan, Chad, Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Haiti, Iran, Libya, Myanmar, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen. It also partially restricts the entry of travelers from Burundi, Cuba, Laos, Sierra Leone, Togo, Turkmenistan and Venezuela.

Iranians are by far the largest group of students affected by the restrictions, according to data from the [Open Doors 2024 report](#) from the Institute of International Education and the State Department. More than 12,000 Iranians studied in the U.S. in the 2023-2024 academic year — roughly three times the number of the next largest group, Venezuelans, of which there were 3,904 that year.

African countries targeted by Trump’s travel restrictions send far fewer people to study at American institutions. Just 66 students came from Chad in 2023-2024, for instance.

The Open Doors data show stark differences in the type of education pursued by students from each of the affected countries. The vast majority of Iranians studying in the U.S. — 81.5 percent — are graduate students, while most students from Venezuela and Myanmar are enrolled in undergraduate programs.

For most countries in the ban, much smaller percentages of the students they send to the U.S. are enrolled in programs that don’t lead to a degree or are working in the U.S. under “Optional Practical Training” status. The latter allows eligible students to pursue employment related to their studies for a year after graduation; those in science, technology, engineering or mathematics fields can apply to extend that to three years.

# Families spend months apart

Arshia Esmaeilian, an Iranian student at the University of South Florida, had hoped to visit his family in Dubai next winter break. His mother had also been applying for a visa to visit him and his brother, who is also on a student visa, in the United States. But the travel ban means neither of those trips are likely to happen, Esmaeilian said.

“I was very disappointed,” said Esmaeilian, 21. “My parents don’t even know if they’ll be able to come to the U.S. as visitors to attend my graduation next spring.”

Another Venezuelan student, a 22-year-old at Pennsylvania State University, hasn’t been home since December. He has an internship in the U.S. this summer and doesn’t feel like he can travel to Venezuela after it ends. “I’m just not willing to expose myself to that risk since I only have one year left in my studies,” the student said, adding, “I really just hope that my parents are able to see me graduate.”

# Universities issue warnings

More than a dozen prominent universities sent out guidance for international students ahead of a potential travel ban — some before Trump’s inauguration in January. The ban stems from [a Jan. 20 executive order](#) instructing the Departments of State and Homeland Security and the director of national intelligence to compile a report on whether allowing people to enter from specific countries was a national security risk.

“If you must travel, please check in with us first,” Stanford University’s Bechtel International Center [wrote](#) in March. “We are able to connect you to immigration resources.” The same month, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology told its students to “bear in mind” that changes and restrictions could “be implemented quickly and without ample warning for travelers.”

Jeff Joseph, incoming president of the American Immigration Lawyers Association, described the ban as the latest salvo in a “full attack on students and institutions,” including visa [revocations](#) and tougher social media screening.

He noted that the ban comes at a time of year when international students typically schedule consulate appointments in preparation for the next school year. “I have big concerns that these students won’t even get their visas in time to be back here for the fall,” Joseph said.

He added that it is unclear how much difficulty visa holders will face when they try to reenter the country, and that he is watching whether the administration issues guidance before Monday to airline carriers and ports of entry.

For Alejandro, a rising senior at the University of Florida, the ban on Venezuelans felt like “a slap in the face.”

“Even more than that, actually — it feels like a full-on betrayal,” Alejandro said. He had celebrated Trump’s victory in November, believing it would help restore democracy in Venezuela.

“I really thought he was on our side — not that he’d be the one locking the doors to innocent people,” Alejandro said.

*Elliot Smilowitz contributed to this report.*

## What readers are saying

The comments reflect concerns about the impact of the travel ban on international students, highlighting issues such as the inability to travel home, potential complications with re-entry, and the negative long-term perception of the U.S. among international students.

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