

NEWS > EDUCATION

International students, scholars stranded as Trump cracks down on visas



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When a close friend was diagnosed with terminal cancer, the Johns Hopkins professor's first thought was to book the soonest possible flight. Instead, she remains a continent away in Baltimore, for fear that as a noncitizen she might be prevented from returning.

It's a legitimate fear these days.

A professor at another Baltimore university, who had landed at Dulles after a quick trip home this spring, was pulled aside, questioned, held overnight and put on a flight back to Africa the next day.

"I even left a burrito in the fridge," said the professor, whose name and other identifying details are being withheld to avoid damaging his attempt to return to the U.S.

"My livelihood has been taken away," the demoralized professor said via a WhatsApp phone call. "This is my life. I worked so hard to get here."

International students and faculty have unwittingly been drawn into two of President Trump's most fervid battles: against universities that he characterizes as hotbeds of "wokeness" and against foreigners, even if they are here legally.

The Trump administration has targeted the visas that allow them to study and conduct research in the U.S. in a series of on-again, off-again directives, creating fear, confusion and uncertainty over how or even whether they will be able to complete their coursework, programs and degrees.

Most recently, the focus has fallen on Chinese students. First, Secretary of State Marco Rubio said last month that the administration would “aggressively revoke” their visas and enhance the vetting of future applicants. Then on June 11, President Trump seemingly reversed course, posting on social media that as part of a yet-unsigned trade and tariff deal negotiated with China, Chinese students could stay here after all.

The State Department did not provide an on-the-record response to questions from The Baltimore Sun, but the Trump administration has repeatedly said in the past visas are a privilege and can be revoked at any time for multiple reasons. Students involved in pro-Palestine protests were targeted earlier in the year, for example, with Rubio saying every time he finds “one of these lunatics, I take away their visas.”

What the administration's whiplashing pronouncements mean remains unclear.

In April, the visas of more than 1,500 international students, including those at Maryland universities, were canceled, although many were restored. Still, the Trump administration has continued to crack down on student visas, suspending new appointments for the interviews required as part of the application process and saying it would scrutinize students' social media accounts.

Reassuring her parents that she is fine has become a part of the daily routine for at least one Chinese student in Baltimore. The woman, who asked that her name not be used to avoid problems with her visa, said the past several months have been emotionally exhausting — and crushing to what she and others from her country have long dreamed about.

“Many Chinese students want to study in America,” said the woman, who is working on a Ph.D. at the Johns Hopkins University. “My parents would say, if you could have the chance, you should go.”

There is more freedom here than in China to follow your interests, she said, rather than have the government influence your course of study.

“I think international students, what’s attractive to us in America is the liberty and the democracy,” she said. “I think that’s what’s special for America.”

Now, that may be damaged by the Trump administration’s actions, she said. She had been planning to go to Europe this summer but instead will remain in the U.S. to avoid what happened to an acquaintance: A Hopkins engineering student who returned to China for the lunar new year in January was denied re-entry to the U.S.

“I don’t think he’s a spy,” the woman said. “He was just here to study.”

Hopkins has among some of the highest percentages of international students among its peer universities. According to the university, 15% of undergraduates, 29% of graduate students and 34% of Ph.D. students are international. Some schools within the university have particularly high shares of students from abroad, such as the Peabody Institute, where more than half of the graduate students are international.

The turmoil over visas is yet another issue confronting Hopkins, which is among the universities that the Trump administration has investigated for alleged antisemitism, and it has lost hundreds of millions of dollars in federal funding, including from the dismantling of the foreign aid agency USAID.

Professors said the seemingly unending attacks on academia are disheartening, even if they are not personally at risk, because their colleagues, students and institutions are.

François Furstenberg, a history professor at Hopkins, has called for Hopkins to come out more forcefully against what he sees as the “existential threats” Trump poses not just to the university’s mission but also to the law and the Constitution.

“There’s no compromise with authoritarianism,” Furstenberg said. “The only path forward is to say, this is illegal and we’re going to fight you in court.

“It would help morale if people can say the university is on our side,” he said. “What’s been distressing is the general silence.”

Hopkins has largely avoided public confrontations with Trump, although it recently sought to support a Harvard lawsuit over federal funding cuts.

A JHU spokesperson said in a statement that the university's Office of International Services is providing "a wide range of support" to students and staff.

"International students, faculty, postdocs and staff are vital members of the Hopkins community, and we remain committed to supporting their success and well-being amid the ongoing changes to federal immigration policy," the spokesperson said.

As other universities have done, Hopkins has warned international students and faculty of the risk of travel abroad these days. “If you cannot afford an interruption in your studies, research, employment or teaching due to an indefinite period abroad, you should carefully consider the need to travel outside the U.S.,” according to guidance on the JHU Office of International Services site. “OIS can never guarantee re-entry to the U.S. as the decision is up to Customs and Border Protection.”

In a message earlier this month to the Hopkins community, JHU President Ron Daniels and other officials noted the toll of a “difficult several months” and expressed deep concern for an international community that “has always been critical to our research mission.”

But another Hopkins professor, a citizen of a European country, said she feels very vulnerable at the moment.

“If anything happens, we’re on our own. The university is not going to pick a fight with the Trump administration over a professor,” she said, asking to remain anonymous to avoid problems with her application for a green card.

This spring, seeing ICE raids across the country has been “truly terrifying,” she said.

“This constant anxiety, it drains you,” she said. “There’s a sense that anything could happen at any moment. Trump could have a bad night, and all of a sudden, another visa could be ended.”

The professor has lived and worked in the U.S. for much of her adult life. “It’s not like we’re just visiting. This is home for us. We make friends here. We work our jobs. We care about our research,” she said. “All of a sudden, that seems like it could all fall apart.”

Rachel Banks, senior director for public policy and legislative strategy at NAFSA: Association of International Educators, said even before the Trump administration's recent actions, "international students and scholars are already the most scrutinized visa holders."

Banks, whose nonprofit group advocates for global education, said she worried that students would be unable to obtain visas to study here, or would decide it wasn't worth the risk and uncertainty. Cutting off this pipeline of talent has long-term implications for universities and research, she said.

"Students will go elsewhere for their education, and that will be a big loss for us," she said. "We need the students, and we also need the scholars to be teaching the next generation."

The Baltimore professor who was sent back to Africa left behind about a half-dozen academic papers in progress, a few were under peer review, and others were largely finished but awaiting copy editing. He's not sure he can complete them from where he currently is, far from his rented home near campus, where all his software and other belongings remain.

He follows the news from his adopted home — he was thrilled that Ravens wide receiver Jay Flowers is back from his injury last season — and wonders how his students are doing.

“I loved it. You see these kids change and grow,” he said. “You think, maybe I did something right here.”

He's been trying to get an interview to obtain a visa to return but has been told the embassies aren't scheduling any.

“The best thing you can do,” he said an embassy source told him, “is wait it out.”

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2025 > June > 16