

Latitudes: Trump administration's ideological vetting of Fulbright scholars raises alarm

1 message

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Latitudes

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Fulbright proposals screened for mentions of race, gender, and climate

The U.S. Department of State has been exercising a last-minute veto of applications to the prestigious Fulbright program on ideological grounds — often rejecting grants funded in part, or largely, by foreign countries, not the United States.

The blackballing of certain Fulbright finalists mirrors the Trump administration's action to [terminate](#) hundreds of federal research grants that are counter to presidential orders banning diversity, equity, and inclusion. But in the case of Fulbright, the administration is acting unilaterally to nix awards for both American and foreign applicants that for decades have been selected jointly, effectively telling other countries that they don't have final say in the spending of their own funds.

Fulbright supporters worry that the appearance of political interference could damage the United States' flagship academic and cultural exchange program, which since its founding, just after World War II, has been an important part of American soft diplomacy.

"It's a reputational hit to Fulbright," said Curt Rice, director of the Fulbright Commission of Norway, who said seven of 17 American Fulbright scholars slated to come to Norway next fall received 11th-hour rejections.

Other country-based Fulbright directors and Fulbright advisers at American colleges — all of whom asked not to be identified because of the political sensitivity of the topic — said 20 to 25 percent of finalists were rejected. Between 8,000 and 9,000 scholarships are awarded annually for study, research, and teaching abroad.

The State Department did not respond to questions or a request for comment.

Rice, a former college president, said he was speaking out as "a huge fan" of the Fulbright program, crediting the scholarship with starting

his own career. “I’m not going to watch silently while the politicians at the State Department damage it so thoroughly.”

In Norway, Rice isn’t alone in expressing alarm. “The candidates who advanced through the Fulbright selection process have demonstrated strong academic merit, and their ability to carry out research in Norway should not be subject to thematic or political restrictions,” Sigrun Aasland, the country’s minister of research and higher education, told *The Chronicle*. She called the recent actions concerning, “given the program’s 75-year tradition of noninterference by either Norwegian authorities or the U.S. State Department.”

The Norwegian government has asked Rice to find other ways to support the scholars and their research.

Rice said he and other country directors received a cable from Secretary of State Marco Rubio in March, weeks after scholars received final approval from the presidentially appointed Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board, that the State Department would conduct a review of all applicants for compliance with Trump’s executive orders.

Following that review, some finalists who had been marked “selected” in the Fulbright scholar database were switched to “nonselected.” Rice said he was not given any explanation for the changes but that many rejected applicants’ research was related to gender, race, and climate change.

One finalist planned to study self-governance by the Sámi, a Norwegian Indigenous group. Another scholar, to be hosted jointly with the Nobel Committee, was examining reconciliation between warring countries after the end of fighting.

Rice and others said they believed the State Department has been doing a keyword search of applications. “It seems like whenever

they're hitting certain buzzwords, then they're stamping those applications with a big 'disapproved,'" one college-based adviser said.

One of the rejected finalists slated to come to Norway was exploring whether the relationship between global warming and climate change was overstated — research that presumably would be of interest to climate-change skeptics, including those in the Trump administration.

Rice said Norwegian finalists going to the United States had been informed last November about awards but had not yet been told about the results of the new vetting process, leaving them in limbo.

But other foreign Fulbrighters such as Saara Loukola, a doctoral researcher at the University of Helsinki, in Finland, said they had been told in recent weeks that their acceptances had been rescinded. Loukola, whose work focuses on antiracism education in secondary schools, had been in the process of getting vaccines and applying for her visa to be a visiting scholar at the City University of New York. She called the rejection a "massive disappointment."

Losing the opportunity to go abroad will be a major setback for her research, said Loukola, who will defend her Ph.D. next year, because the United States is far ahead on curriculum development and teacher training on antiracism. While there is a Nordic network of scholars doing related research, and her institution has offered an extra contract to continue her work, "it's not the same to do it in your own bubble," she said.

While the University of Helsinki has issued a [statement](#) supporting academic freedom in the face of American government cuts, Loukola worries that the current situation could create "so much pressure for researchers to self-censor."

The Norwegian government has committed to sponsoring the rejected scholars, "to make it in every way we can a Fulbright, although we can't call it a Fulbright," Rice said. But some scholars may see the

non-Fulbright Fulbright as less prestigious, while in other cases, colleges' decisions to grant sabbaticals to scholars or host visiting researchers is tied to participation in the prominent exchange program.

There is also concern that the perception of political meddling could deter future applicants at a time when Fulbright had been trying to [encourage](#) more, and more diverse, participants.

The program was [established](#) more than three-quarters of a century ago to advance mutual understanding and international engagement. Treaties established binational commissions, made up equally of Americans and members from the host country, to select scholars, and the costs were shared. Today, foreign partners underwrite a larger share of the program in many countries — Norway contributes 70 percent of Fulbright funding, Rice said.

Later programs, beginning in 1961, were set up and supported through American embassies abroad. The binational programs, however, account for 75 percent of Fulbright alumni.

And the selection process operates largely the same: Applicants are initially vetted by subject-matter experts through an American-based nonprofit organization, the Institute of International Education, which then sends candidates to U.S. embassies and binational commissions. Finalists are then submitted to the State Department, which typically gives a rubber stamp to country-based decisions, current and former Fulbright directors said.

This year, the State Department signed off on the selections — only to announce several weeks later the review for executive-order compliance.

Aasland, the higher-education minister and a Fulbright alumna, said the Norwegian government was seeking to “clarify both this year’s

decisions and the process going forward to ensure continued trust in the Fulbright partnership.”

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Rubio says government will “aggressively revoke” Chinese student visas

The Chinese government is protesting the Trump administration’s plan to “[aggressively revoke](#)” the visas of students from China.

Rubio said the State Department would work with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to terminate the visas of students with Chinese Communist Party connections or who are studying in “critical” fields. In his statement, Rubio said the U.S. government would enhance screening of all visa applicants from Hong Kong and mainland China.

Rubio did not outline the processes for increased vetting of applicants, nor did he specify what majors and programs might prompt a visa revocation. It's also unclear how the administration would define connections to the CCP: Would it scrutinize the ties of students themselves, membership by relatives, or institutional linkages, such as through a Chinese university?

A spokeswoman for the Chinese foreign ministry called the action “politicalized and discriminatory.”

“The U.S.’s unreasonable decision to revoke the visas of Chinese students under the pretext of ideology and national security seriously harms the lawful rights of Chinese students and disrupts people-to-people exchanges between us,” the spokeswoman said during a [press conference](#).

Some 277,300 Chinese students studied in the United States in the 2023-24 academic year, making them the second-largest source of foreign students on American campuses.

During President Trump’s first term, the administration [considered, but shelved](#), a plan to bar all Chinese students from the United States, although it did yank the visas of some Chinese graduate students and researchers with [ties to Chinese military and intelligence](#). The first Trump administration also opened a wide-ranging [investigation](#) into academic and economic espionage, focused on China.

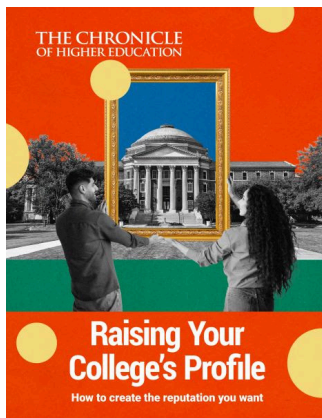
But a presidential adviser, Stephen Miller, suggested that national security wasn’t the only issue and that Chinese and other foreign students were displacing young Americans on college campuses. “We cannot have a policy in America where every citizen of this country ... has to compete with all of planet Earth,” for college admission, jobs, and public benefits, Miller said during a meeting with reporters.

Higher-education and Asian American groups warned that a policy discouraging Chinese and other international students would

undermine American scientific competitiveness. “Shutting the door on Chinese students doesn’t just betray our values — it weakens our leadership in science, technology, and innovation,” said Gary Locke, a former U.S. ambassador to China and chair of the Committee of 100, a leadership organization of Chinese Americans.

About 40 college-related organizations signed on to a [letter](#) drafted by the American Council on Education to Rubio that also sounded the alarm about a [worldwide pause](#) on scheduling new student-visa interviews, urging the administration to “act expeditiously” to restart appointments. The State Department has said the suspension was needed to put in place a plan to screen all students’ social-media accounts.

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Chinese researcher charged with smuggling a pathogen

Federal officials in Detroit have charged a University of Michigan researcher from China with allegedly trying to smuggle a dangerous

biological pathogen into the United States.

A [criminal complaint](#) said Yunqing Jian and her boyfriend, Zunyong Liu, tried to bring in a fungus called fusarium graminearum, which can damage agricultural crops and cause illness in humans and livestock.

Authorities said that Jian had been funded by the Chinese government to do research on the pathogen and that Liu did similar research at a Chinese university. The pair were charged with conspiracy, smuggling goods into the United States, false statements, and visa fraud.

Meanwhile, Eastern Michigan University said it was [ending an engineering-teaching partnership](#) with two Chinese universities following congressional pressure. The public college said its collaborations with Guangxi University and Beibu Gulf University did not involve research or technology transfer and that coursework did not include cybersecurity.

Still, the university “takes seriously the importance of protecting U.S. national security,” President James Smith said.

The chairman of two congressional committees, Rep. John Moolenaar and Rep. Tim Walberg, both Republicans of Michigan, had [sent a letter](#) to Eastern Michigan warning of the risks of its Chinese ties.

Other institutions, including [Duke University](#), Georgia Institute of Technology, and the University of California at Berkeley, have come under similar scrutiny by Moolenaar and Walberg, who lead the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party and the House Education and Workforce Committee. Like Eastern Michigan, several institutions have ended joint programs with China.

Judge backs Harvard in international-student showdown

A federal judge has extended her order blocking the Trump administration's effort to bar Harvard University from enrolling international students.

Judge Allison D. Burroughs had issued an earlier temporary order after the U.S. Department of Homeland Security said it was [revoking](#) Harvard's authorization to host foreign student visas. The department had originally said the university would lose its certification immediately but later amended its notice to give Harvard 30 days to respond, which is required by student-visa regulations.

The administration's action against international students is an escalation of a conflict with one of the nation's most prestigious colleges. In a [court filing](#), Harvard's head of immigration services said that the move has instilled "profound fear, concern, and confusion" among international students and that many have looked into transferring to another college.

The Chronicle is keeping tabs on the latest Trump administration news affecting international students, diversity, research, and other parts of higher education. Check out our [tracker](#).

Around the globe

The Institute of International Education has announced the [winners](#) of its annual awards for innovation in international education, including Lone Star College, the University of Illinois at Urbana-

Champaign, the University of Oklahoma, and the Alamo Colleges District.

The president of Israel's Academy of Sciences and Humanities said that [exclusion](#) from European research programs is “almost a death sentence for Israeli science.”

The Russian government will [control](#) admissions numbers at public universities.

Nepal is offering free visas as part of an effort to [attract foreign students](#).

The Thai government has dropped charges against an American academic [accused of insulting](#) the country's monarchy.

Colleges and schools in Myanmar are [closing](#) in order to adopt additional security measures.

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