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# Attacks on Chinese Students Could Wreak Havoc on Higher Ed

The Trump administration's latest effort to revive its student deportation campaign could drastically curtail the largest population of international students in the country.

By Liam Knox



Rubio announced Wednesday that the State Department will begin revoking Chinese students' visas.

Drew Angerer/AFP/Getty Images

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**S**ecretary of State Marco Rubio announced on Wednesday night that the Trump administration will “aggressively revoke” Chinese college students’ visas and heighten scrutiny of visa applicants from China. The new policy specifically targets “those with connections to the Chinese Communist Party or studying in critical fields.”

It’s the administration’s latest move in what has been a sudden resurgence in its attacks on international students, which it seemed to suspend in April after legal efforts led to the restoration of the legal status of thousands of students.

The news sent shock waves through higher education and could lead to a major reduction in foreign students at American universities, especially public research institutions. China contributes the largest number of international students to the U.S., with nearly 280,000 enrolled in 2023–24, according to data from the Institute of International Education—about a quarter of the total international student population in the country.

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That share, however, has been shrinking since the COVID-19 pandemic; last year, India overtook China as the No. 1 source country of international students. But Chinese students are far more likely to enroll in undergraduate programs and pay more in tuition. They also make up a significant slice of STEM researchers: 16 percent of all U.S. graduate students in STEM fields and 2 percent of undergraduates are Chinese nationals, according to a 2020 report from the Center for Security and Emerging Technology at Georgetown University.

It's not clear whether the visa revocations would be accompanied by legal status terminations in the Student Exchange and Visitor Information System or prompt deportation proceedings, as they did for thousands of international students in March and April. Those steps would be the purview of the Department of Homeland Security.

The targeting of students in “critical fields” in particular could devastate STEM programs and research labs at smaller universities across the country, where Chinese international students are heavily represented. Rubio did not clarify what fields could be considered critical, potentially setting the stage for a sweeping focus on areas

where GOP lawmakers have raised concerns about sensitive national security research being shared with the Chinese government.

A spokesperson for the State Department did not respond to a list of questions, including requests to clarify the scope of the new policy's target and the timeline for visa revocations, in time for publication. At a press conference yesterday, department spokesperson Tammy Bruce declined to "get into the details" of how the new visa scrutiny would be applied or what "critical fields" the department was referring to, because it "might give up our hand and make certain things less effective."

"When we think of critical fields, we think of national security, the nature of how we keep America safe and secure and more prosperous," she said. "It is important to keep a broad base, because that could mean many things."

The new policy's focus on students with ties to the Chinese Communist Party has also raised concerns about academic freedom and free speech violations. Jonathan Friedman, managing director of U.S. free expression at PEN America, said the new policy targeting Chinese students would "hold student visas hostage to an ideological litmus test and disrupt the open exchange of ideas across cultures and borders."

"'Aggressively revoking' visas based on political ideology is a gross violation of basic free expression principles that anchor the academy," he wrote to *Inside Higher Ed*.

William Brustein, a retired longtime international student administrator, said the vague nature of Rubio's directive could enable a sweeping dragnet that catches the majority of Chinese students—especially since association with the ruling Communist Party is difficult to avoid in China.

“How will they know who's a member? Maybe they'll say if you were in a Chinese-sponsored youth group as a child, that could prevent you,” Brustein said. “Right now that policy is so vague that it could cover all Chinese students who want to study in the U.S.”

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## **Revocation Resurgence**

The administration briefly retreated from its persecution of international students late last month, after targeting pro-Palestine student protesters and expanding its scope to terminate the legal residency of thousands of students at institutions across the country. But a spate of successful court challenges halted the campaign in April, spurring the Trump administration restore more than 5,000 students' SEVIS statuses.

A lull followed the restoration as students, advisers and lawyers waited for the administration's next move. It came two weeks ago, when the Department of Homeland Security released a new Immigration and Customs Enforcement policy granting the agency more leeway to revoke students' SEVIS status with little justification.

The Trump administration's new strategy seems to target specific international student populations. So far, those have been recent graduates on Optional Practical Training visa extensions, students at Harvard University and potentially other institutions in their crosshairs, and now students from China, who Rubio claims are more likely to be national security threats.

The State Department has also begun to tighten visa restrictions for applicants and incoming students. On Tuesday, Rubio announced a pause on all new student and exchange visa interviews while the administration implements an intensive new social media screening policy. The latest announcement on China also said the State Department would review application criteria to "enhance

scrutiny of all future visa applications” from China and Hong Kong.

Marjorie Hass, president of the Council of Independent Colleges, said there’s already a process for vetting international students, and that the administration’s new policy seems more aimed at scoring political points and justifying deportations than enhancing national security.

“Institutions have their own admissions standards and the embassies do vet students who come into the country,” she said. “It’s not currently the Wild West.”

Brustein said that if international students from China weren’t already moving away from American colleges en masse due to this spring’s targeting of foreign students, the latest move is sure to discourage future applicants.

“We’re shooting ourselves in the foot,” he said. “Even if some of these decisions are reversed, we’re undoing the progress we’ve made over so many years in being this welcoming environment for the best and brightest in the world.”

“That harm I don’t think can be undone.”

## **A Blow for Research Universities**

Brustein has led international student offices at West Virginia University, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Ohio State University, where he said there

were “thousands” of Chinese students who often paid three times as much as their domestic peers.

He said the colleges likely to be hit hardest by a major reduction in current and future Chinese students are public ones, especially regional institutions in areas with shifting demographics and declining college-going rates.

“There are regional public universities and flagships across the Midwest, in the South, that have a large contingent of Chinese students who are coming particularly for STEM education,” Brustein said. “It’s those ones that survive on a thin revenue stream who are going to suffer the most.”

He added that a sizable reduction in Chinese international students would likely hit scientific research hardest.

“Many Chinese students get degrees in computer science, engineering, and go on to go to grad school or do an OPT,” he said. “They stay in the country, work in our labs, contribute significantly to innovation in this country, not China. To lose that is going to be a very big blow to our capacity for innovation.”

Hass said that Chinese students have been both a financial lifeline and a source of cross-cultural exchange between the two countries for more than a decade. She said the benefits for higher education and for American diplomacy have been overwhelmingly positive, and a large-scale rollback of that relationship would be destructive for both.



“This is a place where the balance of trade is very much in favor of the U.S.,” she said. “It’s mystifying why we would be undermining that.”

She added that for many colleges, international students—and the volume of full-paying Chinese students in particular—help institutions improve access for local students.

“Colleges will miss out on a lot of revenue,” she said. “That means the burden has to be borne by domestic students.”

## Written By



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