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Latitudes: These students are their country's best and brightest but face academic dismissal

1 message

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Latitudes

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Students from Ghana could lose their visas if scholarship support isn't paid

A group of Ghanaian students face academic dismissal and the possible loss of their visas because their home government has not paid their scholarships for months.

Some 185 students from the West African country could be blocked from fall classes at the University of Memphis and forced to move out of their campus housing by early August because of unpaid tuition and fees. The Ghanaian Scholarship Secretariat program owes the university \$3.6 million, according to a student leader.

“These students face academic dismissal, visa complications, and loss of housing and support, through no fault of their own if GSS does not fully meet all financial obligations,” a university spokesman said in a written statement. “We are now left with no other choice but to move forward.”

The spokesman said that the students had “proven to be the best and the brightest,” with an average grade-point average of 3.75.

The university signed an agreement to be an academic partner with the Ghanaian government in 2023 to enroll students through the need- and merit-based scholarship program.

Although Memphis has a concentration of Ghanaian students, scholarship recipients studying at other colleges and in other countries have also been affected. Members of the minority party in Ghana’s Parliament held a recent [press conference](#) to press the government to act in “good conscience” and pay up.

“These students did not smuggle themselves into foreign countries,” said Fred Kyei Asamoah, a lawmaker who serves on the education committee. “The government of Ghana selected them, issued formal letters of sponsorship, and assured them of the state’s support. To now renege on this promise is not just a breach of contract but also a betrayal of trust.”

The Ghanaian embassy in Washington, D.C., said it had forwarded a request for comment to the “right authorities” in Ghana. Ghana’s Ministry of Education did not reply to an inquiry.

Manuel Asiamah, a junior majoring in biomedical engineering at Memphis, said students and their family members have contacted government officials but have not gotten any response. He believes that the new government, elected last December, does not want to support a program started by the previous administration, which was from the opposing party.

Asiamah said students learned of the debt a month ago, when university officials held a town hall to tell them that their tuition bills for fall 2024 and spring 2025 had not been paid.

August 9 is Memphis's deadline for students to have settled their outstanding balances to remain in good academic standing. Under federal law, international students not enrolled in classes full time lose their legal status to be in the United States and could face deportation.

Asiamah said college officials had been supportive and that he understood that "the debt cannot continue." The students have contacted lenders and philanthropic foundations without success. The university has a [fund](#) to accept donations for the students.

Students staying on campus over the summer have already begun to feel the financial pinch, with multiple students sharing a single dorm room or moving in with friends, said Asiamah, who is spending the summer working in a lab at the University of Tennessee's College of Pharmacy.

"Tuition is supposed to come out of my pocket," he said, "and I have \$633 in my bank account."

Asiamah — who wants to earn a doctorate and a medical degree and open his own clinic — would not have been able to study abroad without scholarship support. Although he was trying to remain positive, having to leave college would be "a waste of the money already paid in the past and a waste of three years of my life," he said.

About 9,400 students from Ghana are in the United States. American colleges have seen it and other fast-growing African countries as a promising source of new international students.

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What's at stake in a trial over international students' speech

A federal trial that concluded this week could have implications for immigration and free speech on college campuses.

Academic groups, including the American Association of University Professors and the Middle East Studies Association, filed a lawsuit challenging the Trump administration's detention and attempted deportation of pro-Palestinian activists, saying that the government's action led other international students and scholars to think twice about speaking out on controversial issues.

"The goal is to chill speech, to silence students and scholars who wish to express pro-Palestinian views," Alexandra Conlon, a lawyer for the academic groups, said during [closing arguments](#) on Monday. "It is stifling dissent."

Government officials dismissed allegations that the administration sought to stamp out noncitizen academics' free speech, saying that the plaintiffs had "imagined" a "grand government conspiracy."

Justice Department lawyers said that visas were revoked based on actions, not words, and that the administration has the power to set priorities such as President Trump's executive orders threatening to deport international students who protested the Israel-Hamas war. They invoked a little-used provision of immigration law that allows the government to deport a person based on speech if the secretary of state deems that their presence in the United States "compromises" American foreign policy.

Here's what else you should know from the two-week trial:

Do noncitizens, including foreign students and scholars, have the same free-speech protections as Americans? From the outset, this has been at the crux of the case. On the [trial's first day](#), the presiding judge, William G. Young, a senior justice for the U.S. District Court in Massachusetts, asked the government's lawyer to answer the question — before she even began her opening statement.

The plaintiffs made their position clear: Government efforts to cancel student and scholar visas are illegal viewpoint discrimination, an

attempt to quash constitutionally protected speech. American higher education rests on free expression, yet foreign academics testified that they had rewritten syllabi, withdrawn op-eds, and canceled research trips out of fear that they, too, could face retribution for expressing political opinions.

The government, which argues that the visa crackdown was necessary to protect national security, has been more equivocal. Ethan B. Kanter, a lawyer representing the Trump administration, called noncitizens' speech rights "context dependent" in closing remarks. As an example, he pointed to federal campaign-finance law, which prohibits donations from foreign nationals. The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that campaign spending is protected speech under the First Amendment. The campaign restrictions underscore that "not in every instance" do noncitizens have "equivalent rights," Kanter said.

Is the Trump administration pursuing an "ideological deportation" policy? The academic groups charge that the government is wielding immigration policy to shut down speech it doesn't like.

Government lawyers, for their part, repeatedly took a "nothing to see here" stance, saying that officials were simply carrying out the priorities of a new president "within existing authority." Federal agents, for instance, [characterized](#) the high-profile arrests of academics as nothing out of the ordinary.

But the Department of Homeland Security set up a [special unit](#) to scrutinize international student and scholar activists' online speech for possible violations of visa or immigration law, pulling analysts from investigations in areas such as counterterrorism and cyberterrorism to handle the workload. An [analysis](#) submitted as part of a brief in support of the plaintiffs found that the foreign-policy provision in immigration law had been invoked only 15 times since 1990, out of

11.7 million immigration cases. Even then, it was typically cited alongside other charges.

What next? Young, the judge in the case, said he would need time before ruling. But his decision may just be the first step in a legal odyssey, pitting the foreign-policy authority, granted to the secretary of state by Congress, against the protections for noncitizens under the First Amendment. Because courts have not dealt with some of the complex legal questions raised in the case, constitutional scholars said it could end up before the [Supreme Court](#).

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Layoffs hit State Dept.'s educational and exchange programs

About 40 people in the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs lost their jobs as part of department-wide layoffs of 1,300 employees.

The layoffs, in addition to 50 jobs lost during an earlier round of cuts, mean that the bureau's staff has declined by 20 percent since

President Trump took office in January, vowing to shrink the size of the federal government.

The firings have raised [concerns](#) about the State Department's ability to continue to support international-education programs and cultural exchanges. The bureau oversees the prominent Fulbright and Gilman scholarship programs as well as EducationUSA, a worldwide network of college-advising centers.

Dept. of Education opens DACA investigations into colleges

The U.S. Department of Education is opening investigations into five colleges for “national-origin discrimination” because of scholarships that may have been awarded to undocumented students.

The department said on Wednesday that it was investigating the University of Louisville, the University of Miami, the University of Michigan, the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and Western Michigan University for possible civil-rights violations. The inquiry will look into whether the institutions are granting special scholarships to undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as children and alleges discrimination against “American-born students.”

“Neither the Trump Administration’s America first policies nor the Civil Right Act of 1964’s prohibition on national origin discrimination permit universities to deny our fellow citizens the opportunity to compete for scholarships because they were born in the United States,” Craig Trainor, acting assistant secretary for civil rights, said in a [statement](#).

Separately, the Trump administration has been [suing states](#) to try to overturn state laws that provide in-state tuition to some undocumented students attending public colleges.

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Around the globe

Federal officials have asked the University of Chicago for information about international students and admissions practices, the university [disclosed](#) in bond-issuance documents. It characterized the request, from the Departments of Justice and Homeland Security, as informational, but noted that “there may be prospective investigations or inquiries.”

Christian colleges are showing [support](#) for a bipartisan bill that would provide a pathway to legal status for undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as children.

Members of Congress pressed three presidents about disclosures of funds from foreign sources during the [latest hearing](#) with higher-education leaders.

The University of Tennessee ended its involvement in a [Chinese-backed scholarship program](#) under pressure from Congress.

The Department of Homeland Security is [drafting a rule](#) that could change the selection process for skilled-worker visas. A text of the new proposal has not been released, but it could be similar to a rule in the first Trump administration, later withdrawn under President Biden, that would have given preferences to higher-wage earners. That could disadvantage recent graduates.

The State Department announced that the United States will [withdraw](#) from UNESCO, the United Nations agency that promotes international cooperation in education, science, and culture.

A record number of Americans have applied to study at [British universities](#).

The Dutch government is pulling back from a [controversial plan](#) to limit the number of English-language degree programs.

Russian security services will [vet](#) scientists' international academic collaborations.

“We are more than buildings,” college presidents in Gaza wrote in an [open letter](#), saying that their institutions would endure even though their campuses have been destroyed in Israeli bombing.

New Zealand wants to attract more international students as part of an [ambitious strategy](#).

Legal scholars and higher-education groups in New Zealand said that proposed legislation to protect free speech on campuses could create “[needless complexity](#).”

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