

Latitudes: Foreign-student enrollments could nosedive this fall

1 message

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A banner for a Virtual Career Fair. The background is a dark, slightly blurred image of a person sitting at a desk. Overlaid on the left is the text 'Virtual Career Fair' in white, with 'Hosted by' and 'CHRONICLE CAREERS' below it. On the right, a green bar contains the text 'October 15, 2025, 12 p.m. - 4 p.m. ET'. Below this, the text 'All higher ed. All here.' is displayed. A blue button with the text 'Register Today' is in the bottom right corner.

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Latitudes

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New international enrollments could decline by one-third

Severe backlogs could prevent 150,000 international students from getting visas in time to start the fall semester, an estimated 30 to 40 percent [drop in new foreign enrollments](#).

That would be on par with precipitous declines in 2020, when the [pandemic](#) closed borders and halted travel. Much of this year's falloff is attributable to a three-week halt in the scheduling of student-visa interviews during the [busiest time of the year](#) for student applicants as well as to changes in visa policy and practices since President Trump took office.

Total international enrollments could decrease by 15 percent, according to projections by NAFSA: Association of International Educators and JB International, which conducts international-education research and helps colleges manage their global work. The result could be nearly \$7 billion in lost revenue.

NAFSA is urging the U.S. Department of State to provide expedited appointments and visa processing for applicants for student and scholar visas.

The State Department [suspended](#) student-visa interviews beginning in late May and throughout much of June in order to put in place a new policy for vetting the online activity of prospective foreign students. Students and colleges have reported scheduling difficulties since interviews were restarted.

Consulates in India, China, Nigeria, and Japan — some of the biggest senders of international students to the United States — have a limited number of interview slots or none at all. In a survey of its members, just 5 percent said appointments were easy to schedule, AIRC: The Association of International Enrollment Management reports.

All applicants for new student visas must have an in-person interview. In a normal year, seasonal demand can put a strain on consulates —

seven in 10 student visas are processed between May and August.

State Department [figures](#) show a 22-percent drop in student-visa issuances in May compared to the prior year. June data have not yet been published, but NAFSA suggests the month's declines could be as large as 80 or 90 percent.

With the academic year slated to start within weeks at many institutions, there is real concern that the bottleneck could cause foreign students to miss the beginning of classes — or the fall semester altogether.

In past years, some of the busiest consulates have prioritized student visas during the peak summer period, and NAFSA is asking that student applications again be expedited during this window. It has also called for students and scholars to be exempt from a [ban](#) on visitors from 19 countries. (The Trump administration is considering restricting entry to the United States to travelers from an additional 36 countries.)

More than a dozen members of Congress are urging the State Department to deal with the backlog, particularly in India, which has the largest population of foreign students in the United States.

“We are dismayed at the possibility that many of these bright young individuals may be blocked” from education and research, the lawmakers wrote in a [letter](#) to Secretary of State Marco Rubio.

The chief source of the backup is likely the department's decision to pause student-visa interviews in order to draft social-media guidance. Under the [new policy](#), consular officers are directed to screen applicants' “entire online presence” for signs of “hostile attitudes” toward the United States.

In a written statement, a department spokesperson “acknowledged” that the new vetting requirements “may impact appointment

availability” and lead to “additional processing time” for students. Applicants are encouraged to apply “as early as they can,” the spokesperson said:

“In every case, we will take the time necessary to ensure an applicant does not pose a risk to the safety and security of the United States and that he or she has credibly established his or her eligibility for the visa sought, including that the applicant intends to engage in activities consistent with the terms of admission.”

The appointment freeze, however, is not the only cause — a move to [terminate the legal status](#) of thousands of foreign students this spring and fears that the Trump administration could place new restrictions on student visas could also have contributed to the drop in issuances. And the United States awarded 12 percent fewer student visas worldwide [last summer](#), when the Biden administration was still in office.

Fanta Aw, NAFSA’s executive director and chief executive, said in an interview that there was urgency to release its analysis now. With the return of students to campus drawing closer, “we have just a few weeks to get this train back on track,” she said. “This is a wake-up call.”

But NAFSA is concerned about the lasting impact of recent policy decisions beyond the immediate academic year. The changes “create an uncertain environment” for students and families, Aw said. “You can’t just switch that on and off.”

Readers, I’m interested in your on-the-ground observations about this summer’s student-visa processing. Email me at karin.fischer@chronicle.com.

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Congress could revive the China Initiative

Congress will try again to revive the China Initiative, the investigation of academic and economic espionage started under the first Trump administration.

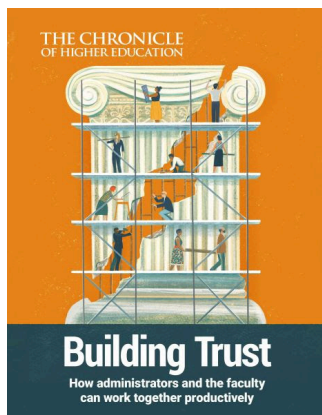
Lawmakers in the U.S. House included a provision restarting the inquiry in the [bill](#) that funds the U.S. Departments of Justice and Commerce as well as some science agencies. A key committee had been expected to approve the legislation last week, but passage was delayed when the House recessed earlier than expected.

Started in 2018, the goal of the original [China Initiative](#) was to counter foreign interference and block Chinese efforts to poach American intellectual property. It resulted in a number of arrests but few convictions. It was shut down by the Biden administration, which said it “fueled a narrative of intolerance and bias.”

More than 1,000 scholars signed onto a [letter](#) that urged lawmakers not to reinstate the probe, saying that it “proved to be more harmful than beneficial” in its first iteration by discouraging scientists, particularly those of Chinese descent, from pursuing government-funded research or academic collaboration with China.

But concerns about Chinese competition and the national-security risks of engagement with China are broadly shared in Washington across political-party lines. Congress is expected to take up the appropriations bill when it returns from recess in early September.

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Columbia U. will review international admissions as part of deal with Trump

Columbia University pledged to “[take steps to reduce its financial dependence](#)” on foreign students as part of a deal it struck with the Trump administration.

The [settlement](#), announced last week, restores most of the \$400 million in federal research funding terminated earlier this year in exchange for a raft of changes to the university’s policies and practices. It is the first deal between the federal government and higher education over the administration’s claims of antisemitism on campus.

Undertaking a “comprehensive review” of international admissions, as Columbia said it would do, would seem to have relatively little to do with the protests at the center of the administration’s complaints. But international enrollments were likely a potent leverage point in negotiations because just two other American colleges enroll more international students than Columbia.

Columbia also agreed to “promptly” respond to government requests for information on international students, including disciplinary actions against them, and to make sure that all students, foreign and domestic, are “committed to the longstanding traditions of American universities.”

The settlement is more evidence of how international education has been pulled into the broader clash between the Trump administration and some of the nation’s most elite colleges. Also last week, the State Department said it would [investigate](#) Harvard University’s “continued eligibility” to participate in the Exchange Visitor Program, which awards visas to visiting professors, researchers, and some students on educational and cultural exchanges.

A State Department spokesperson said the agency has a policy of not commenting on the “specifics of compliance reviews.”

“The Department of State is committed to safeguarding U.S. national security and ensuring U.S. university sponsors maintain safe, reputable, and compliant campus environments for their exchange-visitor programs,” the spokesperson said in a written statement. “We have a responsibility to ensure that all EVP sponsors comply with regulatory requirements, including the program’s educational and cultural purposes.”

Around the globe

The State Department appears to have removed a provision that permitted some current students renewing their visas to [bypass the mandatory interview](#).

A bill proposed by Republican lawmakers would do away with higher education’s [exemption](#) from a cap on skilled-worker visas.

The University of California system admitted an additional 3,300 international students for this fall as compared to last year because of [uncertainty](#) about whether students from overseas will enroll.

Harvard canceled an issue of an academic journal that was dedicated to [education and Palestine](#).

Malaysian students on a government scholarship who were supposed to study in the United States have been sent instead to [other destinations](#) that are “less volatile.”

Students in Sudan resumed their studies two years after a [civil war](#) closed universities.

A proposal calls for exempting research and development from European Union deficit rules to increase [investment in science and](#)

[innovation](#).

I **joined** the public-radio program [Midday](#) to talk about the potential impact of visa and other policy changes on international-student enrollments.

And finally ...

The United States and other Western countries placed sanctions, including [cutting academic ties](#), on Russia after its invasion of Ukraine.

Now, one Russian university is offering a [master's program](#) on navigating and mitigating the impact of international sanctions. The two-year program at Moscow's Higher School of Economics will train students to identify and assess the risks of sanctions and train them in international corporate compliance.

The program is part of a Kremlin directive to build more resilience under international isolation but is not funded by the Russian government.

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