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Latitudes: U.S. government data on international enrollments were off — by 200,000 students

1 message

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Wed, Jul 9,
2025 at 11:00
AM

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Latitudes

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Hardly a rounding error

The U.S. government underreported the number of international students on American campuses last year by more than 200,000 — an error that made it appear that overseas enrollments were falling when in fact there was steady growth.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security quietly corrected the data ahead of the Fourth of July holiday, weeks after being alerted by an international-education group.

The updated data paint a significantly different picture of foreign-student trends during the 2024-25 academic year. And the mistake — hardly a rounding error — could undermine confidence in the government's public data reporting.

The Student and Exchange Visitor Information System figures, posted on the [Study in the States website](#), previously showed an [11-percent decline](#) in international enrollments last year. Instead, foreign-student numbers increased by 6.5 percent.

The correction does not mean that there were inaccuracies in the underlying Homeland Security database of student visas, known as SEVIS, and at no time did the government lose track of international students, said Chris R. Glass, a professor of educational leadership and higher education at Boston College who writes about overseas-enrollment trends on his blog, [Distributed Progress](#).

Separate visa-issuance figures published by the U.S. Department of State show a [drop-off in student-visa issuances](#) in the months ahead of the last academic year. That suggests a decline in new students was offset by larger numbers of students continuing their studies or recent graduates remaining in the United States to work. (Most students typically get a single visa for the duration of their studies.)

EnglishUSA, an association of English-language programs, first alerted the Department of Homeland Security in mid-April about irregularities in the Study in the States data. The department took the data set offline, thanking EnglishUSA for “bringing this to our attention,” according to an email shared with *The Chronicle*. It reposted corrected data last week.

A comparison of the old and new data shows an undercount of 203,049 students, beginning in August 2024. The gap continues through March 2025, when EnglishUSA alerted Homeland Security officials.

According to the updated data, the number of active international students in the United States hit an all-time high, of 1.3 million, last fall. That's a 26-percent increase over September 2022.

The Department of Homeland Security did not offer an explanation for the error, either when it took down or reposted the data. In a written statement provided to *The Chronicle*, a Homeland Security spokesperson blamed the Biden administration, which it said “neglected basic oversight” and “published inaccurate information.”

“Americans deserve a government that takes data integrity seriously,” the statement said. “Under President Trump, this administration is restoring accountability and transparency.”

Glass, the Boston College professor, said the misreporting was troubling because the data offers a rare current census of the number and status of international students, compared to other retrospective surveys of enrollment trends. “Federal policymakers and researchers use SEVIS data to monitor real-time trends in enrollment, inform immigration policy, and assess the impact of federal regulations,” he said.

Glass pointed out this isn't the only recent enrollment “data fail.” In January, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center said a “[methodological error](#)” had originally led it to report a decline in freshmen enrollments at American colleges last fall. In fact, the number of 18-year-old freshmen increased.

The problems with the foreign-student data were first identified by Mark Algren, interim director of the University of Kansas' English-language institute who has long monitored international-student

numbers. He spotted an anomaly: Month-to-month totals showed almost no fluctuation when natural enrollment shifts would be expected, particularly among students studying English, who tend to enroll for shorter periods.

Instead, Algren said in an interview, the government had been publishing data that effectively replicated the month before, with no significant changes since August 2024. While he said he thought a mistake in capturing information from the SEVIS database was the cause of the error, “with such a discrepancy going on for months, you don’t know what kind of quality control” the government has.

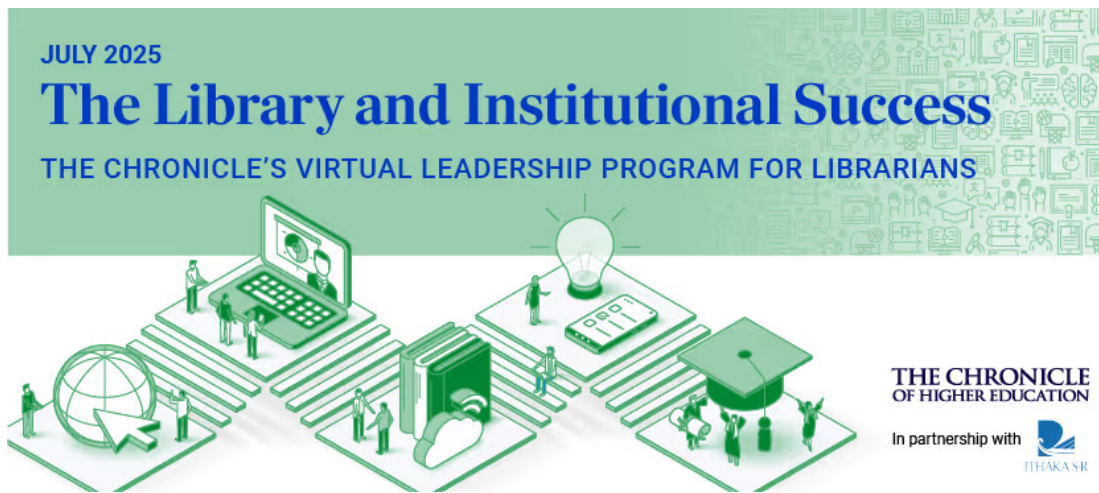
Algren said he had also notified the department that a number of countries that begin with the letter “U” had been mislabeled by continent and region — the United Kingdom was categorized as Asia and Ukraine as East Africa — but they had not been fixed in the latest update.

Although the corrected figures are a bright spot, they don’t erase headwinds facing international education. In addition to last year’s decline in student-visa issuances, 14 percent fewer F-1, or student, visas have been [awarded](#) between January and May of this year than during the same time period in 2024.

Policy changes by the Trump administration — including a rebooted [travel ban](#), the mass cancellation of international students’ legal status, and threats to revoke Chinese-student visas — have caused anxiety and uncertainty among students and colleges.

A recent three-week suspension of visa interviews during peak student-visa season and new requirements to vet the social-media accounts of all student applicants have led to a summertime [bottleneck](#). There are concerns that new students will not be able to get their visas in time for the start of the new semester.

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Trial over detention of international students and scholars begins

Do international students and scholars have the same First Amendment rights as American citizens? That's a central question in a trial that began Monday in Boston in a case challenging the Trump administration's detention of academics who have participated in pro-Palestinian activism.

The lawsuit, filed by the American Association of University Professors, alleges that the free-speech rights of noncitizen students and scholars have been curtailed because they fear the consequences of expressing views in conflict with U.S. government positions. [Mahmoud Khalil](#), [Rümeysa Öztürk](#), [Badar Khan Suri](#), and others were visa or green-card holders when the government detained them for weeks at a time or sought to do so.

“Not since the McCarthy era have immigrants been the target of such intense repression,” said Ramya Krishnan, a lawyer with the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University, which is representing the AAUP.

But the government says there is no policy of detaining and deporting people for ideological reasons. A lawyer for the U.S. Department of Justice said the AAUP’s allegation that its members’ speech has been chilled is a theory based on a fear of something that could happen, not something that has actually happened.

“The law requires their case to be grounded in reality,” said Victoria Santora, the Justice Department lawyer. “It is not.”

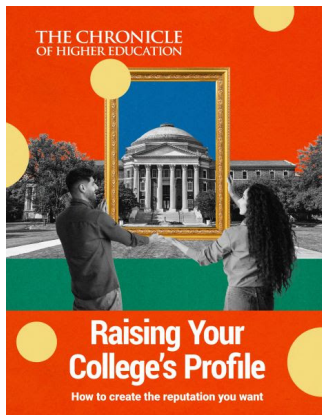
The government has broad discretion to revoke visas, Santora said.

During the trial’s first day, a pair of professors who hold green cards testified they have canceled research trips, skipped conferences, and revised syllabi after the detention of students and scholars who voiced criticism of Israel, my colleague Nell Gluckman [reported](#).

There are concerns that the Trump administration’s deportation efforts, along with other policies that affect visa holders, could discourage foreign students and academics from coming to the United States.

The trial is expected to last nine days. Check back with *The Chronicle* for ongoing coverage.

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Rule could put a time limit on international students' studies

The Trump administration has drafted a proposed rule that would cap the amount of time international students can study in the United States, revisiting a regulatory change proposed during the president's first term that failed to make it across the finish line.

The Department of Homeland Security submitted the [notice](#) of the proposed change to the federal budget office at the end of June, typically the first step in the regulatory process. The rule would “establish a fixed time period of admission and an extension of stay procedure” for foreign students and visiting scholars, the notice said. It did not include details about the substance of the draft regulation.

In 2020, the previous Trump administration published a [proposed rule](#) that would have required students to file for an extension if they wished to remain in the United States for more than four years. Students from countries with high visa overstay rates or that are

designated as state sponsors of terror could face stricter two-year limits.

The rule did not make it through the regulatory process before that year's presidential election, and it was later [scrapped](#) by the Biden administration. It's unclear if the new version would follow the contours of the earlier proposal.

Imposing time limits on foreign students' studies would be a significant shift from current policy and practice. Students typically receive a single visa for their studies and can remain in the United States as long as they are enrolled full time and meet other legal requirements.

Critics of the original change said many students, including those who switch majors, transfer, or pursue dual degrees, could be forced to file for an extension before they complete their degree, without a guarantee that they would receive a renewal. That could discourage students from studying in the United States, they said.



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International-enrollment drops pose credit risk

Colleges with large numbers of international students could be at increased credit risk because of restrictive federal-policy changes, Moody's Ratings warns.

In an [analysis](#) released last week, the ratings agency said that colleges where international students make up more than 20 percent of enrollments and those already struggling with enrollment could be particularly at risk.

As the number of American high-school graduates declines, many colleges have looked to international students, who often pay full tuition, to [make up for enrollment and budgetary shortfalls](#).

“Universities intending to fill the gap with more international students may fall short,” the report said.

Around the globe

A “Big, Beautiful Bill” signed into law last week imposes a new [“visa integrity fee”](#) on all nonimmigrant visas, including student visas.

A federal judge dismissed a [lawsuit](#) brought by 13 Iranian students who were refused visas after being accepted to American colleges.

Visa denials are the biggest challenge facing English-language programs, according to [program directors](#).

Interest in interning abroad is growing among American students, a new [survey](#) from Terra Dotta shows.

Minnesota is the latest state to be [sued](#) by the Trump administration in its effort to overturn policies providing lower in-state tuition rates to undocumented students.

Foreign-language programs are among the 400 degree programs to be cut or consolidated by public colleges in [Indiana](#).

A prominent neurobiologist has left a tenured position at the University of California at San Diego to [return to China](#) to lead an institute there.

Harvard University attracted \$560 million in donations and contracts from China over the past 15 years. Those ties have become another [line of attack](#) in its standoff with the Trump administration.

Chinese students may once again be [political pawns](#), and the impact could be long-lasting.

Thanks for reading. I always welcome your feedback and ideas for future reporting, so drop me a line at karin.fischer@chronicle.com or message me confidentially at [Signal](#). You can also connect with me on [X](#), or [LinkedIn](#), or [Bluesky](#). If you like this newsletter, please share it with colleagues and friends. They can [sign up here](#).

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