

'WIDER POLITICALIZATION'

Tucked Into Columbia's Deal With Trump: A Restriction on International Enrollments

By *Karin Fischer* July 24, 2025



ILLUSTRATION BY THE CHRONICLE

What's New

Columbia University will undertake a “comprehensive review” of its international-admissions processes and “take steps to reduce its financial dependence” on foreign students as part of its landmark deal with the Trump administration.



Columbia and the Trump Administration

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What Columbia Just Threw Away

The Art of the Deal Comes to Columbia

The University That Chose Surrender

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

International enrollments were likely a potent leverage point in negotiations with Columbia — just two other American colleges [enroll more international students](#).

The deal also signals the Trump administration's willingness to use foreign students as a political bargaining chip as it seeks to overhaul higher education, especially at the country's most prestigious institutions.

“There’s wider politicalization of international students,” said Brendan Cantwell, a professor of higher, adult, and lifelong education at Michigan State University.

The Details

The requirement to study its policies for international admissions is among the terms of Columbia’s [22-page agreement](#) with the government. The provision states that university will ask questions about why international students want to study in the United States as part of the admissions process.

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Columbia also consents to making sure that all students, international and domestic, are “committed to the longstanding traditions of American universities,”

including free inquiry, open debate, and the “fundamental values” of equality and respect. It will create training materials so that students understand campus norms and values. The Trump administration has repeatedly suggested that international students have been the [leaders](#) and provocateurs behind [pro-Palestinian protests](#) that rocked Columbia and other campuses.

In addition, the university agrees to comply with rules of the federal student-visa system and “promptly” respond to government requests for information on international students, including disciplinary actions against them.

And Columbia will examine its current business model through the lens of its reliance on tuition from foreign students.

The settlement also includes provisions not specific to international students but nonetheless tied to the university’s global engagement, such as a pledge to abide by federal rules regarding gifts and contracts from foreign sources and to make that information readily available.

The Backdrop

The Columbia agreement points to the ways in which international students have been weaponized in the administration's showdown with higher education.

While there has previously been (frequently bipartisan) concern about students from overseas [displacing](#) local high-school graduates at American colleges, the tenor of the debate around international enrollments has shifted, Cantwell said. "Now it's that the very presence of international students challenges American values."

This spring, the administration began a crackdown on student visas as part of its campaign against antisemitism. Many of the thousands of students who had their legal status terminated, however, had no history of political activism, just minor legal infractions, like speeding tickets or parking violations. Amid court challenges, the [mass cancellation](#) of foreign-student records was itself canceled.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio also threatened to "[aggressively revoke](#)" visas of Chinese students as part of a geopolitical standoff with that country.

International students have been a prominent part of the government's battle with Harvard University. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security attempted to [strip](#) Harvard of its ability to enroll foreign students, although a judge's order halted the ban from going into effect.

The University of Chicago disclosed in recent financial filings that it had been asked by federal officials about international students and admissions practices. It characterized the request as informational but said "there may be prospective investigations or inquiries."

The Stakes

About 40 percent of Columbia's 36,000 students are from outside the United States. By comparison, 6 percent of all students at American colleges are international.

Columbia's disproportionate number of international students may have made that population a powerful pressure point in negotiations with the Trump administration. At the same time, it could give the

university wiggle room in its promise to lessen its financial dependence on foreign tuition.

The deal does not specify the size of the international-enrollment decrease Columbia is expected to make. Other provisions similarly are not spelled out. For example, the agreement does not say what questions the university is supposed to ask students to “elicit their reasons” for wanting to study in the United States — something the State Department already does routinely as part of the visa-application process.

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Still, it's highly unusual for the federal government to be weighing in about the particulars of a college's business model. And international students *are* part of Columbia's business model, especially in its master's programs.

More than half of Columbia graduate students are from abroad, with schools like its graduate programs in engineering and arts and sciences having the largest share of foreign enrollments, according to the university's

[International Students and Scholars Office](#). At the graduate level over all, master's students outnumber those pursuing doctorates by about three to one.

By comparison, 20 percent of Columbia undergraduates are visa holders.

Since the pandemic, there has been a spike in overseas enrollments in master's programs at colleges across the United States. In fact, the increases in such programs were so substantial that some institutions have taken steps to reduce international numbers because of fears of [overreliance](#). It's possible Columbia may have also wanted to rein in growth.

While Wednesday's agreement is specific to a single institution, it is likely to reverberate more broadly among international students and families, reinforcing a perception that the United States, under the Trump administration in particular, is unwelcoming to outsiders.

The Columbia announcement adds to existing headwinds for foreign enrollments, which include new requirements

for [social-media vetting](#) and a three-week freeze on [visa interviews](#) that came during the busiest season for student-visa issuances and led to a bottleneck that could hamper students from getting visas in time for the start of classes. Some of the challenges predate the current administration, such as a decline in [student-visa issuances](#) for last fall and a 10-year high in the number of [denials](#).

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