
Latitudes: Some campus journalists are scared to report while on a student visa

1 message

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Latitudes

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A campus newspaper joins a lawsuit challenging student-visa policies

Stanford University's student newspaper is suing the Trump administration, saying that reporters and editors on student visas have self-censored or quit out of fear that the U.S. government could retaliate against them for what they publish.

The Stanford Daily, along with two unnamed international-student protesters, is part of a [new lawsuit](#) brought by the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression challenging the administration's efforts to detain and deport students and scholars for speech and other activities protected by the First Amendment.

The lawsuit underscores the widespread impact President Trump's policies and actions have had on foreign students and academics in the United States. Many of the Stanford students were involved in news coverage, not in opinion writing, and declined assignments about the Israel-Hamas war or asked that their bylines be removed from already-published articles.

"They're afraid that even reporting something the wrong way could get them shipped out of the country," said Conor Fitzpatrick, supervising senior attorney at FIRE, the free-speech advocacy group.

The case is a fresh reminder of the growing pressures on student journalists, even as college newspapers have become critical in reporting on the tensions between Trump and higher education.

Mike Hiestand, senior legal counsel for the Student Press Law Center (SPLC), said there has been an "explosion" in calls to the group's hotline since the March arrest of [Rümeysa Öztürk](#), a Turkish doctoral student at Tufts University who co-authored an op-ed in the student newspaper that was critical of Israel.

The administration has said that the high-profile arrests of Öztürk and a half-dozen other international students and scholars were based on "actions, not words." But during a [recent trial](#) in a separate lawsuit, the op-ed was the only specific evidence a senior State Department official provided of Öztürk's "activity and association" with Students for Justice in Palestine, a pro-Palestinian student group accused of creating a hostile environment for Jewish students.

Many of the queries to the student-journalism group have been about international and immigrant students as sources in reporting. But Hiestand said he has heard from a number of young journalists who are apprehensive about reporting while on a student visa.

One student, from Spain, was “petrified” about taking part in a bilingual reporting fellowship on the U.S.-Mexico border. A political cartoonist from France worried about the potential ramifications of pieces he had published about the war in Gaza and other contentious topics. (Editors at the cartoonist’s newspaper decided to substitute a pen name on past drawings.)

At Stanford, a student covered a vigil organized by Jewish and Palestinian student groups only to decide not to publish the article because of concern it could jeopardize her visa, according to the filing. Another staff writer asked that all articles she had written about foreign affairs be removed from the *Stanford Daily* website. An editor quit, citing concerns about their immigration status.

International students “have also largely stopped talking to *Stanford Daily* journalists,” the lawsuit said.

FIRE declined requests to interview Stanford student journalists.

In April, SPLC and other collegiate journalism groups took the “unprecedented” step of publishing a [student-media alert](#) about threats to speech and reporting posed by immigration enforcement at colleges. The guidance recommended that campus news organizations have in place clear policies for anonymous bylines and sourcing and for taking down or modifying previous coverage.

“We have never before issued this type of alert. We do not do so lightly now,” the organizations wrote. “In fact, what we are suggesting today stands in opposition to how many of us as journalism educators have taught and advised our students over the years. But times have changed, and we feel we must respond to the moment.”

International-student journalists have expressed concern in the past that the stakes in reporting are different for them than for their American classmates. In 2022, for instance, a pair of student journalists from China asked that an article they wrote for the *Yale Daily News* about a campus protest of China's Covid restrictions be published [anonymously](#). Reporting publicly on criticism of the Chinese government could put them and their families back home at risk of retaliation, the students said. Editors at the Yale newspaper refused to publish the article without a byline, and it was later posted on social media.

In that case, however, students were fearful of a backlash from an authoritarian foreign government. Today, student-visa holders worry that they will be vulnerable to repercussions from the U.S. government.

More than 21,000 international students studied journalism at American colleges in the 2023-24 academic year. While that number pales in comparison to the 210,000 foreign students in engineering, overseas interest in journalism has jumped 65 percent over the past 15 years, according to the [Institute of International Education](#). (And reporters and editors for campus newspapers, like your correspondent, often major in other fields.)

Many foreign students come to the United States to learn the basics of journalism in a society with a free press. "It's an opportunity to export journalism," Hiestand said. "They're getting a very different education now."

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How FIRE's lawsuit differs from earlier court challenges

FIRE's lawsuit is not the first one filed over the arrests of foreign students and scholars for public criticism of Israel's actions in Gaza.

While it mirrors aspects of a [case](#) brought by the American Association of University Professors, the new lawsuit goes further in challenging the legal foundations of immigration law that the Trump administration has cited in its deportation efforts.

During a trial last month in Boston, the AAUP argued that the administration's "ideological deportation" policy is unconstitutional because it made visa holders a target for their pro-Palestinian

activism. 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.

FIRE is focused on the underlying statute, saying that it is a constitutional violation to invoke immigration-law provisions for free speech and other activities protected by the First Amendment.

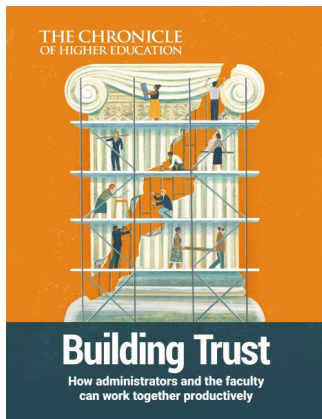
FIRE's approach could be challenging because presidents are seen as having broad authority over immigration and foreign policy. The judge in the AAUP case, William G. Young, said as much during closing arguments: "It seems to me we have a new administration who has, you know, absolutely the primary authority over the foreign policy of the United States."

Fitzpatrick, the FIRE lawyer, counters that "presidential power to limit immigration is subservient to constitutional rights" for citizens and noncitizens alike.

A narrow ruling on the current policy would not protect international students from attempts by future administrations to "deport students for a question they ask in class or a subject they write about in a term paper," he said.

In a written statement, a senior State Department official said that the department did "not comment on ongoing litigation." Visa holders and "other aliens have obligations to comply with U.S. law," the statement said.

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Trump administration seeks to dismiss Harvard lawsuit over foreign students

The Trump administration is asking a federal judge to throw out a lawsuit brought by Harvard University over government efforts to revoke its ability to enroll international students.

Harvard is “not a responsible host of foreign student-visa holders and could not be trusted to host, monitor, discipline, and report on its foreign student-visa holders,” the government said Friday in [arguing for dismissal](#) of the case.

Harvard’s failure to hand over disciplinary records and other information is evidence that it is “particularly derelict” in its oversight of international students, the legal filing said. Allowing the university to continue to enroll students from overseas creates national-security risks, it added, citing the broad authority the president has over foreign policy and immigration.

Trump issued a proclamation in June barring foreign students from entering the United States to attend Harvard after the judge in the case, Allison D. Burroughs, blocked an attempt by the U.S.

Department of Homeland Security to [immediately rescind](#) the university's authority to participate in the student-visa system.

A letter sent in May by the department would have prevented Harvard from enrolling new foreign students and required current students to transfer to another institution or lose their legal status to stay in the United States.

In another [filing](#) last week, government lawyers said the agency will not enforce the May letter in order to “simplify” the court case. In its lawsuit, Harvard said that Homeland Security officials had not followed their own rules for terminating the university's student-visa certification, among other arguments.

In a written statement, a Harvard spokesperson said that “the university will continue to defend its rights — and the rights of its students and scholars.” The statement noted that the recent action in court does not affect Harvard's ability to host international students and scholars.

The dispute over foreign students is part of a broader clash between the university and the administration. It is also being watched by other colleges concerned that Trump officials could use the student-visa system against them if they do not follow the president's agenda.

Visa backlog could lead to big drop in tuition revenue

Colleges could lose more than \$1.7 billion in tuition revenue if new international enrollments decline by 20 percent this fall. A 30-percent

drop would cost colleges almost \$2.6 billion, an [analysis](#) from Shorelight shows.

The international-education company used tuition rates from the fall of 2024 in estimating the financial blow, said Brian Meagher, a vice president in charge of analytics. Colleges in New York could see the greatest tuition loss, followed by California and Massachusetts. A 20-percent decrease in students from India alone would result in \$541 million less in annual tuition.

Shorelight's dashboard also allows users to calculate the impact by congressional district, institutional type, and academic level of study.

Shorelight's estimates don't include the money international students would spend on housing and other living expenses. NAFSA: Association of International Educators [projects](#) a \$7-billion effect on the American economy as a whole if new international enrollments fall by 30 to 40 percent in the upcoming academic year.

The U.S. Department of State [froze](#) student-visa interviews for more than three weeks in May and June, two of the busiest months for student-visa issuances, while it put in place a [social-media vetting policy](#). A global backlog has led to concerns that many students will not get their visas before classes start.

As the academic year begins, I want to hear from readers about what an international-enrollment downturn could mean for your campus and how you're responding. I'm interested not only in the financial impact but the potential effect on academics and community life. Email me at karin.fischer@chronicle.com.

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Around the globe

Oklahoma's attorney general has backed a legal challenge by the Trump administration to a law that provides [in-state tuition](#) to eligible undocumented students, making it the second state, after [Texas](#), to go along with federal efforts to reverse a state policy for immigrant students. A federal magistrate judge issued a [judgement](#) last week recommending that the law be repealed.

An appeals court ruled that the University of California must reconsider a policy that prevents [undocumented students from working on campus](#). The system had explored adopting a policy to allow such students to work but [backed away](#), citing concerns it could conflict with federal employment law. The judges said that fear of federal litigation was not sufficient legal basis to keep the prohibition in place.

The U.S. Department of Justice will allow a postdoctoral fellow at Georgetown University to [return to work](#) while a legal case continues over efforts to deport him because of alleged ties to Hamas.

Most community colleges enroll international students, but they are less likely to offer study-abroad programs, according to a [study](#) of international education at more than 900 institutions in all 50 states.

The Australian government lifted a [cap on foreign enrollments](#) but said universities could only admit more international students if they complied with certain requirements, such as proving there is enough housing for all students.

Public universities in Hong Kong signed an agreement to follow the “[advice and guidance](#)” of the Chinese government and President Xi Jinping.

A [report](#) from HolonIQ lays out the best- and worst-case scenarios — and those in between — for international enrollments in the United States by 2030.

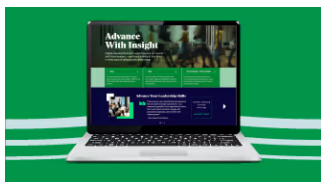
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