

WAITING GAME

Even as Classes Begin, Some Foreign Students Are Still in Visa Limbo

By [Karin Fischer](#) September 5, 2025

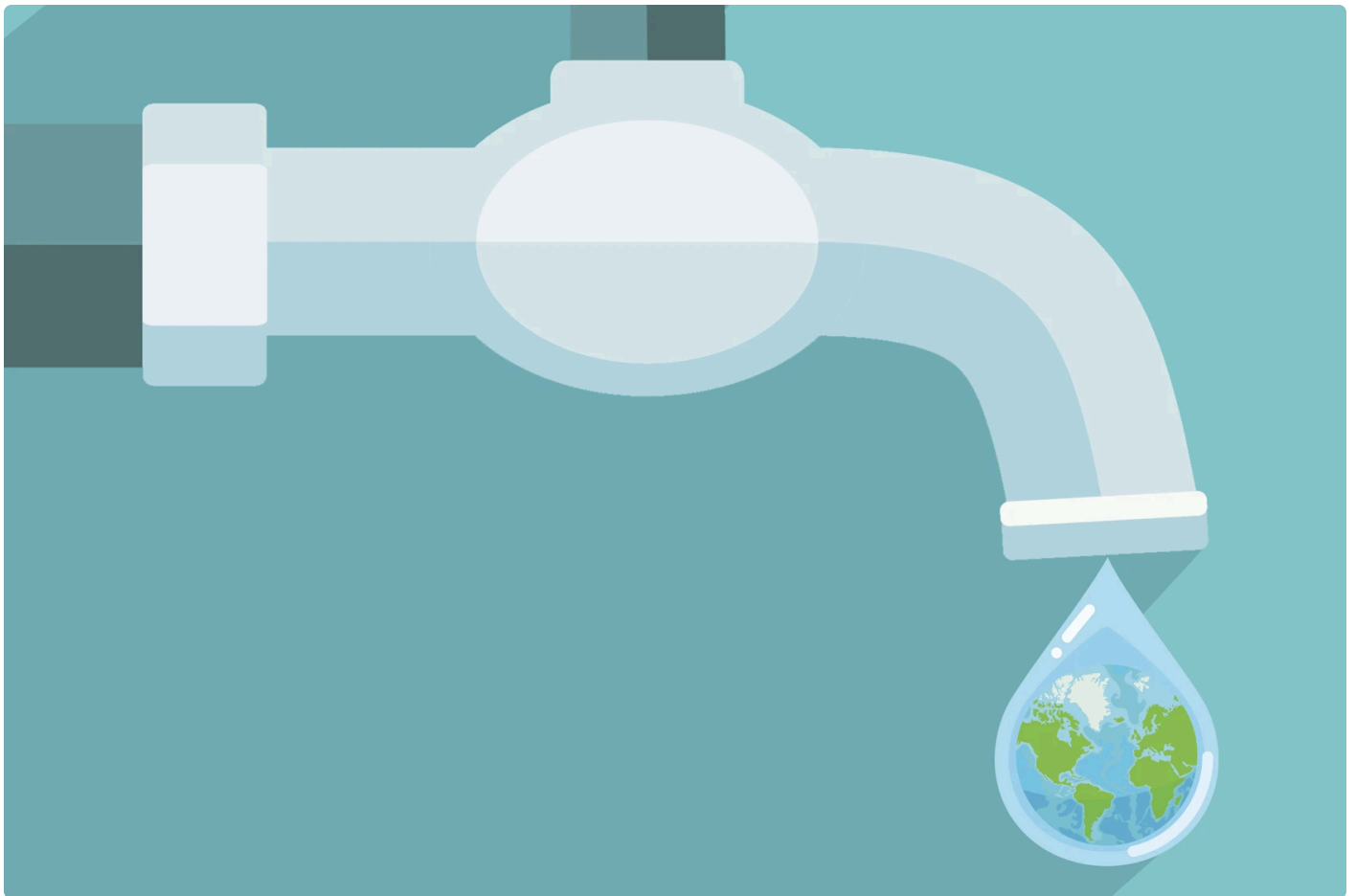


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A global backlog of student visas has led to a decline in international enrollments this fall. The question is, by how much?

Days, and even weeks, after classes have begun, many foreign students are still struggling to get visa appointments, holding out hope of salvaging the semester as colleges try to find ways to accommodate late arrivals. At the same time, institutions are working to reassure those stuck in their home countries that their American educational dream isn't ended, only deferred. They are offering online courses and activities to keep students engaged and on track to enroll when bottlenecks ease.

Some colleges, particularly those with large shares of graduate students, reported decreases in incoming international students of 15 percent or more. Others said the hit had been softer than they had feared earlier in the summer.

And some said they were simply unsure about final enrollment totals because of the unprecedented tumult in the visa system. Northeastern University, which has more

international students than all but one other American college (New York University), pushed back its start date for those from overseas by a month so that as many students as possible could make it to campus.

“In no way is this business as usual,” said Satyajit Dattagupta, the university’s chief enrollment officer.

The primary cause of the logjam is a three-week suspension in student-visa interviews in May and June, imposed so that the U.S. Department of State could put in place a plan to vet international students’ [social-media accounts](#). It couldn’t have come at a [more disruptive time](#), as students worldwide geared up to come to the United States. “It’s akin to pausing retail sales between Thanksgiving and Christmas,” said Tom Dretler, chief executive of Shorelight, a company that supports colleges in overseas recruitment.

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And when visa interviews resumed, “the faucet didn’t turn on,” Dretler said. “It’s dripped.”

In [India](#), where 59,000 student visas were issued in the summer of 2024, visa appointments often come open in batches of a few hundred and are snapped up immediately. In fast-growing Ghana, some students recently reported not being able to find an interview slot until December — December 2026. (The State Department’s current [official wait time](#) for a student-visa appointment in Accra, Ghana’s capital, is 11 months.)

The mandate to examine every student’s online presence for content “hostile” to the United States has increased application wait times. “Consulates have the same people and the same resources, so the number of visas they can process has to go down,” said Balaji Krishnan, vice provost for international affairs at the University of Memphis. Just weeks before the semester began, visa issuances for his students were 50 percent behind last year’s pace.

“Simply put, demand exceeded supply,” said David L. Di Maria, vice provost for global engagement at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County.

At UMBC and elsewhere, declines were concentrated among master’s-degree students — the very population that has driven [post-pandemic increases in international enrollments](#). In fact, UMBC saw growth in foreign students at the undergraduate and doctoral levels, Di Maria said. Several liberal-arts colleges contacted by *The Chronicle* also reported that most of their expected students had made it to campus.

One reason for the particular impact on master’s students may be that large numbers of them come from places, including India and parts of Africa, where visa delays and denials were already par for the course, making a serious problem worse. “It’s an exacerbation of the status quo,” said Sasha Ramani, senior director of corporate strategy for MPower, a lender serving students studying in the United States and Canada. “But dealing with the status quo wasn’t easy.”

Ramani said some students who could afford to were traveling to other countries with lesser backlogs to apply for their visas. But that simply isn't an option for many.

Because the screening mandate applies to all foreign students, there have also been slowdowns at consulates where the application process typically has been smooth, such as in Japan. Jennifer L. Brook, director for international-student programs at Foothill-De Anza Community College District, in California, said about half of her students had been affected by the delays.

While the visa backlog has been the main hurdle for international students this fall, there have been other challenges. About 10 percent of Foothill-De Anza's 3,000 international students are from Myanmar, one of a dozen countries included in a [new travel ban](#) imposed by the Trump administration. The ban blocked 150 admitted students, Brook said. "That's going to have an impact — institutionally, culturally, financially — that's going to affect us for a long time."

In the short term, she has worked with colleagues across the district to deal with the enrollment unpredictability. They have relaxed policies to allow international students to register for classes late and to defer their admission at the last minute without penalty. Students were allowed to arrive up to a week after the fall quarter began.

At Northeastern, where students previously had to individually petition for a late start, new international students now have until October 1 to make it to campus. They also can begin their coursework at one of Northeastern's overseas campuses, in Canada and Britain, while they wait for their American visas.

Arizona State University is allowing students to start their studies through its well-established online programs, although relatively few have opted to go that route, said Matt Lopez, deputy vice president for enrollment. They want both the classroom and cultural experience of being in the United States, especially give the investment they and their families have made in their education. They also fear falling behind in building a professional network.

Up until the semester actually began, many students didn't want to consider virtual alternatives and just focused on trying to get visas, Lopez said.

If students have been accepted to colleges in other countries, they could still choose to go elsewhere this fall — many British universities don't begin their terms until next month. But college officials said that most students have opted to defer, hoping to make it through the visa gantlet in time for the spring semester.

“It's a case of not wanting to give up on a dream,” said Rajika Bhandari, an international-education strategist.

Colleges don't want to lose those students, either, and are working to keep them engaged. Arizona State is using international-student groups to do outreach to students in visa limbo and holding virtual events, such as Sunday-morning watch parties for home football games across different time zones. UMBC has expanded its student-led global-ambassador program.

Memphis is organizing mid-semester get-togethers in cities with large numbers of deferred students, a way to reinforce a sense of community. “We want to keep them tethered to the university,” Krishnan said.

To maintain connections, Northeastern has invited admitted students and their parents to attend on-the-ground fairs and events intended to attract prospective international students. Many showed up for receptions last month in the Indian cities of Bengaluru, Hyderabad, and Mumbai.

Interest among prospective students was also high, with attendance on par with previous years, said Dattagupta, the enrollment chief.

Even as this fall’s students await the green light, it’s already time for admissions officers to jump into a new recruitment cycle.

While the current uncertainty and volatility has strained colleges, the real worry may be about next year. After all, this year’s students were far into the admissions process

before President Trump was inaugurated in January. Most had said yes to their college of choice by the time of the visa-interview freeze.

The new crop of students, by contrast, has absorbed months of bad-news headlines about studying in America before they will even write their first college essay. They're asking questions about college policies on late arrivals and tuition-deposit refunds and whether applying early could give them a "meaningful advantage" in landing a visa appointment, said Andrew Wright, senior associate vice president for enrollment management at San Jose State University.

"The memory of those disruptions," Wright said, "is shaping the concerns of fall-2026 prospects."

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