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Latitudes: Big changes could be coming for student visas. Here's what to know.

1 message

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Latitudes

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Could foreign students' admission to the U.S. come with an expiration date?

A proposed rule setting time limits on international students' study in the United States would also restrict transfers and program changes and give the federal government greater authority to determine academic progress.

The [rule](#), published last week in the *Federal Register*, had been widely expected and is an [unfinished initiative](#) from President Trump's first-term agenda.

International-education groups oppose the effort to upend a decades-old policy that permits students and scholars to remain in the country for the duration of their studies as long as they remain in good academic standing. Instead, students' admission to the United States will come with a fixed expiration date, either their program end date or after four years — whichever is shorter.

The proposal "introduces a wholly unnecessary and new level of uncertainty to international student experience in the United States," said Fanta Aw, executive director and chief executive of NAFSA: Association of International Educators. It could [compound the challenges](#) facing international enrollments, including a student-visa backlog and efforts by the Trump administration to revoke foreign students' legal status.

Because students will have no guarantee that they will be able to finish their academic degrees, the rule could "act as an additional deterrent to international students choosing to study in this country, to the detriment of the American economy, innovation, and global competitiveness," Aw said.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security said the regulatory changes would bring visas for foreign students and scholars, known as F and J visas, in line with most other nonimmigrant visas, which come with fixed periods for authorized stay.

The current student-visa system lacks sufficient government oversight, a department spokesperson said in a written statement: "For too long, past administrations have allowed foreign students and other visa holders to remain in the U.S. virtually indefinitely, posing

safety risks, costing untold amount of taxpayer dollars, and disadvantaging U.S. citizens.”

I’ve heard from many of you about the proposed rule. Here are some of the questions and concerns readers have raised:

What will the new system mean for Ph.D. students and others who need more than four years to finish their degrees? Doctoral students and others exceeding the four-year limit will have to apply for an extension. As many of you point out, the [government’s own data](#) show that the average bachelor’s student takes 52 months to earn a degree and 25 percent need six years or more. (The figures are for all students, not for international students specifically.)

That suggests a substantial share of the 1.1 million foreign students in the United States would need to go through the extension process.

Master’s students, on the other hand, would be authorized to come for only the length of their program, plus a 30-day grace period to leave the country. (The current grace period is 60 days.) Language study would be limited to 24 months.

What qualifies students for an extension? Acceptable reasons for extending a stay include “compelling” academic reasons, a documented illness or medical condition, and “exceptional circumstances” beyond students’ control, such as natural disasters or institutional closures.

Students who have been suspended or put on probation or who have shown a “repeated ability and unwillingness” to complete their studies — such as failing courses or applying for multiple extensions — would not qualify for an extension.

While campus officials can recommend extensions, the final decision lies with immigration officers, raising concerns that the government would effectively be making academic determinations that are the

purview of colleges. The proposed rule would “intrude on academic decision-making,” said Miriam Feldblum, president of the Presidents’ Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration.

It would also place additional administrative burdens on colleges and on students who legitimately need more time to complete their degrees.

These aren’t the only new academic conditions for student visas.

Graduate students would be prohibited from changing their programs of study. Students who’ve completed a program at one educational level would only be allowed to pursue another degree at a higher level — in other words, undergraduates could continue on to graduate study but students who earn a master’s degree couldn’t enroll in another master’s program, even if they changed their career goals.

The new restrictions are needed because of past abuses of the student-visa system, the administration said. Students have moved from program to program to prolong their stay in the United States, sometimes changing to study at lower levels, “raising concerns about the temporary nature of their stay.” Nearly 77,000 students have spent more than a decade on a student visa since the current program was begun in 2003, with some making as many as 19 program changes, according to the Department of Homeland Security.

The proposal does not give specific reasons for the limits on graduate education or specify whether they apply to both master’s and doctoral students.



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The rule cracks down on a practice that colleges don't like either.

Students would have to complete an entire academic year before they are

able to transfer or change their educational objectives.

Within higher education, there are frequent complaints about initial transfers or jumpers, students who receive a visa to attend one institution but request to transfer their student records to another soon after arriving in the United States. Colleges resent the time and money they have spent recruiting students who will never set foot in their classrooms as well as the hassle of transferring visa records at one of the busiest times of the year.

That doesn't mean iron-clad restrictions are the answer, educators said. The provision tackles "a narrow concern but may unintentionally limit legitimate student choice," said Omobonike Odegbami, director of international student services at Hamilton College. Students who discover that their original college is not the right academic, cultural, or financial fit could face "undue barriers" to continuing their education elsewhere, she said.

The rule said exceptions could be made to the no-transfer rule, but it's not clear how they would be granted.

Is this a solution in search of a problem? The open-ended nature of the student-visa system poses a national-security risk and is an invitation to abuse, the Trump administration argues. There are some 2,100 people who came to the United States on student visas between 2000 and 2010 and remain here without updating their visa status, the rule said.

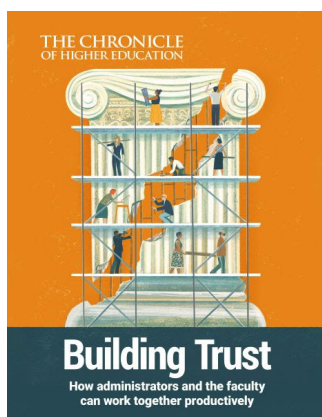
The applications for extension would provide opportunity for more frequent, direct check-ins with the government. (The Department of Homeland Security also considered a standard two-year period of admission but decided it would place too much of a burden on students and scholars.) The renewal requirement could also deter fraud by scaring off those who might use student visas as an illegal route into the United States, the rule said.

As many of you point out, however, 2,100 overstays represents just 0.2 percent of the number of international students enrolled at American colleges each year during the same period. All international students must be reported to a centralized government database, meaning that they are already more closely monitored than other visitors on nonimmigrant visas.

Nonetheless, there is abuse of the student-visa system, which ends up hurting legitimate students, said Eddie West, assistant vice president and senior international officer for California State University at Fresno. Although he called some of the administration's actions "heavy-handed," West, who co-authored an [opinion piece](#) about the issue, cautioned against "reflexively dismissing or downplaying a proposal to strengthen the integrity of the visa system."

What's next? Public comments on the proposed rule will be accepted through September 29. The Department of Homeland Security will have to consider and respond to that feedback before publishing a final rule.

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Government seeks to overturn judge's ruling in Harvard case

The Trump administration is asking a federal appeals court to overturn a judge's [ruling](#) that blocked the government from revoking Harvard University's authority to enroll international students.

In a [filing](#), government lawyers argued that presidential authority to make policy decisions related to immigration is “not subject to judicial second-guessing.” They also denied that the move by Kristi Noem, the secretary of homeland security, to boot Harvard from the student-visa system was in retaliation for the university's unwillingness to accede to wide-ranging campus changes sought by the administration.

A federal judge had granted Harvard a restraining order, allowing it to continue to host foreign students this fall.

Student-visa slump dates back two years

The number of student visas issued during the 2024 fiscal year declined by 10 percent — a falloff that predates the Trump administration and policies that threaten to depress international enrollments.

Some 400,700 F-1 visas were issued in 2024 as compared to 445,400 in the previous year, according to a [report](#) from the State Department. That's fewer than in the 2022 fiscal year, too.

However, the number of J-1 visas, for scholarly and cultural exchange, awarded that year increased. Overall nonimmigrant visa issuances also ticked up during the same period.

Around the globe

Middlebury College will close the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, its globally focused satellite campus in California, after its enrolled students complete their degrees in June 2027. The college said it was a financial decision.

The Trump administration canceled funding for [UNESCO](#), the United Nations agency that promotes international cooperation in education, science, and culture, as part of a legally untested effort to claw back foreign-aid funding approved by Congress.

Illinois is the latest state to be [sued](#) by the Trump administration over its policy of providing in-state tuition to undocumented immigrants.

Ukraine will allow men between the ages of 18 to 22 to [travel and study abroad](#), although draft-eligible men ages 25 to 60 will still have to stay in the country.

Four foreign universities will open campuses in [Greece](#).

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