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The Students Left Behind by the Travel Ban

Disappointed but not deterred, students from Libya and Myanmar shut out of the U.S. still harbor dreams of an American college education.

By Johanna Alonso



Photo illustration by Justin Morrison/Inside Higher Ed | Library of Congress | Rawpixel

Muad Alsharif has been entrenched in American culture his whole life.

Though the 20-year-old Libyan has never visited the country, three of his aunts are American citizens, born in Florida, and his grandfather studied and worked in the U.S. in the 1950s. He plays video games like *Overwatch 2* and *Among Us* online with American friends, who he says are always welcoming and encouraging of his dreams to study in the U.S.

“My father used always talk about the U.S.—how the life [is] there, how college life [is], even though my father [has] never been there,” he said. “I’ve always dreamed to study in the U.S., experience the American life, American people and see American cities, as I see on the internet.”

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Eager to follow in his grandfather's footsteps, Alsharif hoped to begin studying chemical engineering at a U.S. institution in fall 2025. To ensure his application was as strong as possible, he took two gap years after graduating high school to attend engineering lectures at Libya's top university and continue to improve his English.

In the end, he committed to the University of Buffalo—mostly due to the substantial scholarship the New York flagship offered him, but also because it had clubs for all his hobbies (creative writing, volleyball, photography)—and a beautiful campus in a historic city, though he never had the chance to visit in person. He also valued the diversity of the student body, which is 55 percent non-white and 12 percent international students, including a small cohort of fellow Libyans.

But ever since President Trump was reelected last November, Alsharif has had a sneaking suspicion that his dream of studying in the U.S. might not come to fruition. After all, Libya was included in the “Muslim ban” during Trump's first term.

In late May, when the U.S. paused all student visa interviews ahead of the rollout of a new social media review for international student applicants, Alsharif's suspicion worsened into dread. Just days later, Trump announced a new travel ban: Libya became one of 12 countries whose citizens are now prohibited from getting a visa, while another seven are under a partial ban that includes restrictions on student visas.

Alsharif is just one of the many students whose hopes of studying in the U.S. this fall were crushed by the travel ban—along with even more who were impacted by residual visa delays apparently caused by the administration's May pause on visa appointments.

The ban is similar to the travel ban on seven majority-Muslim countries that President Trump implemented early in his first term. But because the current travel ban was instituted in June, it especially impacted students who had already committed to studying at U.S. universities, paid their deposits and booked flights, and were simply waiting to get their visas.

In 2023–24, according to an analysis by NBC News, almost 19,000 students from the 12 travel ban countries attended college in the U.S., the majority from Iran. While that figure represents less than 2 percent of all international students who come to the U.S. in a given year, international education experts say the impact will be substantial on both the students who planned to attend American colleges and on the institutions themselves.

“The numbers gloss over the impact, which is that, on the one hand, this has direct life-changing consequences for the students that are directly impacted now,” said Miriam Feldblum, founder of the Presidents’ Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, an organization of college leaders focused on supporting international students. “And it’s generating anxiety, uncertainty and fear for so many

other students who think their country can be next on such a list.”

The Trump administration has already announced that it may expand the travel ban to another 36 countries in coming months.

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The ban comes at a time when the government is cracking down broadly on immigrants and creating new policy barriers for international students looking to study in the U.S. Most recently, the Department of Homeland Security has proposed eliminating duration of status, the rule that allows international students to stay in the U.S. until their studies conclude.

If the U.S. continues to become more and more hostile toward international students, experts warn it could have devastating effects on universities and the U.S. economy. Not only does international enrollment produce billions of dollars in revenue for universities every year, but international students also bring economic boosts to their college towns and launch a disproportionately high number of start-ups, even spurring innovation among their American peers, according to research.

‘Worst Mistake of My Life’

Colleges have offered students impacted by visa restrictions the opportunity to defer their admission or begin their studies online. Alsharif said that the University of Buffalo has promised he would be allowed to transfer to the institution whenever the ban is lifted.

Another student impacted by the travel ban, who asked to remain anonymous, was committed to the University of South Florida before the travel ban took effect. The university offered to let him take online classes, he said, but he didn't think it was worth paying the full price of tuition if he isn't able to attend in person.

The student lives in Myanmar and was interested in studying engineering—particularly quantum mechanics and mechatronics, a branch of engineering that brings together multiple fields to create more streamlined design and production systems. He spoke to *Inside Higher Ed* via Reddit instant messages, because electricity in Myanmar

sometimes shuts off without warning, and he worried an audio call could be cut off.

The visa process in Myanmar can be haphazard, with the embassy assigning appointments on “random dates,” he said. He was never granted an appointment in the months between when he was admitted to USF and when the travel ban went into effect.

“We thought of giving visa interview abroad. But waited for the appointment because it might increase chances of approval in my own country,” he said in an instant message, noting that people interviewed abroad were starting to get denied. “Worst mistake of my life yet.”

He, like Alsharif, stressed that he was eager to study in the U.S. both because of the academic excellence of the U.S. education system and because he had grown up loving American culture and the way the college experience was portrayed in films.

For many international students, Feldblum said, the U.S. college experience offers far more integration of academics, extracurriculars and work experience than they would have access to in their home countries.

“Our ability to combine outstanding academics with exceptional co-curricular activities and a climate in which you’re able to pursue all different passions and interests, that’s not what’s available in other countries,” she said.

“One of the things the U.S. provides is the opportunities for serendipity, for discovery.”

What Comes Next?

Both students *Inside Higher Ed* spoke with will continue their educations elsewhere this fall. The student from Myanmar is continuing his A-level courses—upper-level high school courses in the United Kingdom—in preparation for potentially studying in Europe in the future. He’s also hoping to become fluent in German.

“Most A-Level schools in my country are cheap in US’s salary,” he wrote. “But, it’s safe to say that I’m one of the students with the privilege, since many students (even before graduating) here either drop school or join military/drafted.”

After the U.S. travel ban went into effect, Alsharif hurriedly applied to any college in Europe and Asia that was still accepting applications, securing a spot at University College Cork in Ireland.

But he’s “not excited at all” to travel to Ireland, he said: His heart is still set on upstate New York. And even though the administration has taken a number of actions against international students—the one that concerns him most is reviews of social media profiles as part of the student visa application process—he would still do anything to study in America.

“I’m very, very, very excited to transfer at any time or at the [first] chance I have,” he said. “The sooner the chance I have, I will just go to the U.S. I’ll just take the risk.”

The student from Myanmar, too, said some of the administration’s actions—namely its recent deportation campaign and arrests of international students—worry him. If he was in America this fall, he said, he would be stressed that a mistake as simple as leaving his ID at home when he went on a walk could end in his deportation. But he, too, still hopes to study in the U.S. eventually. Even if he ends up getting his bachelor’s degree in Europe, he said, he wants to go to U.S. to complete a master’s degree after the ban lifts.

“Of course,” he wrote, “my ambitions, dreams and interests wouldn’t die out that easily.”

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