

Democracy Dies in Darkness

Trump's crackdown on foreign students barely impacts enrollment, data shows

About 1.3 million students in the U.S. had active visas in October, down less than 1 percent from a year ago.

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Todd Wallack

number of foreign students in the U.S. decreased by less than 1 percent this fall, according to national data, despite predictions that their enrollment would plummet this year due to a crackdown by the Trump administration.

International enrollment has slipped at some schools with high percentages of foreign student enrollment has remained surprisingly steady this semester at others around the country, school officials said.

Overall, there were 1.3 million students with active visas in the U.S. in October, down a fraction of a percent from a year ago, the Department of Homeland Security reported.

"We haven't seen the bottom fall out" of foreign student enrollment, said Clay Harmon, executive director of AIRC: The Association of International Enrollment Management, a nonprofit trade group for schools and recruiters.

International enrollment remains critical for many schools for funding, research and to expose students to a broader array of cultures and ideas, advocates said. Foreign students account for roughly 6 percent of student enrollment at U.S. colleges overall, but they make up a far higher percentage of the student populations at the country's most prominent liberal arts schools and research universities.

Academic experts had warned that enrollment could plummet after the Trump administration's actions against foreign students: This year the administration restricted travel from 19 countries; asked to pressure schools to limit the number of foreign students; paused student visa screening views for three weeks while it revamped procedures; canceled thousands of visas for students who have been accused of crimes or overstaying their visits; and is trying to deport several for protesting the Israel-Gaza war. Administration officials have said they want to protect the country from criminals and terrorists, even though not all the students the government tried to deport have criminal records.

A Department of Education spokesperson said in a statement that the agency wants universities that use taxpayer money to "prioritize expanding opportunities for American students."

"At the same time, we welcome talented foreign students who contribute positively to our campuses, communities, and economy, while ensuring that those who come to study in the United States respect our laws, values, and national interests," the department said.

SA: Association of International Educators predicted in July that the number of new foreign students could drop as much as 40 percent this fall, costing college towns \$7 billion and more than 100 jobs. Now the group's chief executive, Fanta Aw, said she is "cautiously optimistic" the decline is smaller than that. The group plans to issue an updated estimate later this month.

At elite schools that the Trump administration pushed to reduce their international enrollment, reported small declines in their freshman classes this fall.

Columbia University, which signed onto an agreement with the administration in July that included a pledge to reduce its financial dependence on international students, reported its freshman class had 15 percent international students, down from 17 percent a year earlier. President Donald Trump unsuccessfully sought to bar Harvard University from enrolling any foreign students. This fall the school reported 15 percent of its freshman class is international, down from 16 percent in 2024.

Harvard and Columbia, however, normally complete most of their undergraduate admissions by March, before the Trump administration attempted to push colleges to limit their undergrad foreign enrollment to 15 percent.

More than a dozen other universities with historically high international student enrollment contacted the Washington Post reported mixed results. Some said they have seen little change in their international recruitment this year, while others have seen notable declines.

"It's a fuzzy picture," Harmon said of the enrollment trade group.

North Holyoke College in Massachusetts, for instance, said 1 in 5 of its students come from other countries this fall, the same as last year, despite warnings that some students could have trouble entering the country. The three-week pause in scheduling visa interviews was not long enough to stop incoming students from obtaining their documents, said Mandy Hart, the dean of admission.

s year was not markedly different than previous years in terms of students having issues with
ining their visas,” she said.

said the school had many conversations with families concerned about the visa situation, but c
idful of incoming students decided to go elsewhere because of it.

r schools that reported only modest changes in international students this fall include the
ornia Institute of Technology, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Rice University, Tufts
ersity, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Yale University.

, which is in Houston and recruits both undergraduates and graduate students from other
tries, said it enrolled nearly 2,300 foreign students this fall, about the same as last year,
unting for 1 in 4 of its students.

several schools reported larger declines.

University of Maryland at Baltimore County’s foreign figures slipped 27 percent and St. Louis
ersity reported a decline of 46 percent. The schools said those declines were concentrated amo
uate students. St. Louis President Edward Feser  said the school’s foreign enrollment
ped primarily because it experienced a surge of demand in an international graduate program t
ince waned.

orically, the State Department has issued reports showing the number of student visas approve
month, but it hasn’t published the data since May, frustrating and puzzling observers who rely
lata to put together forecasts. “It’s quite unusual,” Aw said.

State Department said it provides data as soon as it is available but did not explain the delay.

archers are now turning to other numbers for clues to enrollment trends. One telling data point is the number of people with active visas in the Student and Exchange Visitor Program system. That number has barely changed over the past year, suggesting foreign enrollment has remained steady.

However, experts note the data includes students who have been in college here for years or are returning on internships and other postgraduate training, so active visa numbers may mask a dip in new enrollments. Advocates also say that it's possible much of the impact from the Trump administration's policies could show up in future years.

Recently, the International Trade Administration released preliminary data showing the number of people entering the U.S. on student visas dropped 19 percent in August. But that data comes with a caveat as well. Many colleges warned existing foreign students not to leave the U.S. this year, which likely has reduced the number of continuing students entering the country this fall.

Most colleges have yet to publicly release their full international enrollment figures for this fall. But the Institute of International Education plans to release results from a survey of more than 800 colleges across the country on Nov. 17, which may provide the clearest picture so far for fall enrollment at U.S. colleges.

Now German graduate student at Rice, Leonard Richertz, 24, said the hardest part about coming to the U.S. this year was obtaining a visa. He was worried when the government temporarily halted visa interviews in late May and his visa didn't arrive until a week before his flight in August.

"That was quite stressful," Richertz said. By comparison, once he had a visa in hand, he said it was easier entering the country and going through security checks.

Richertz, who is pursuing a master's in computer science, said some of his friends wondered why he decided to go to the U.S. right now, but he raved about his school and the chance to explore the country.

re's so much opportunity," he said. "I think that doesn't go away just because some policies ge."

What sources are saying

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Edward Feser

President at St. Louis University

What readers are saying

The comments reflect a divided opinion on the impact of the Trump administration's policies on foreign student enrollment in the U.S. Some commenters argue that reports of declining enrollment are exaggerated or misleading, while others cite specific declines, such as a 37% drop... [Show more](#)

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