

INTERNATIONAL

# In Northwestern's Trump Agreement, International Students Singled Out For 'Open Debate' Training



By [Sonel Cutler](#)

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For her freshman year at Northwestern University, Dasha Dubinina arrived two days early from Belarus to learn alongside other international students how to set up a bank account, file taxes, and maintain their visa status.

“You arrive, you’re jet-lagged, you’re shocked. You’re trying to understand how campus life works, and how to find your place on campus, and how to find a dining hall,” Dubinina said.

Soon, Northwestern will have to come up with ways to teach its 9,500 international students about another issue, too: the norms of free inquiry and open debate.

It’s one of several provisions administrators agreed to as part of a November [deal](#) with the Trump administration to restore [nearly \\$800 million](#) in frozen federal research funding.

International students and their advocates are at odds over whether the unusual ask will help or hurt.

Some say training international students in free inquiry could help them better adjust to new academic expectations as they enter an unfamiliar environment. Others are wary that training

only international students could enforce the view that they are threats to national security and cultural norms.

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The Trump administration froze funding for Northwestern in April after the Education Department and the Department of Justice accused administrators of, among other things, creating a hostile environment for Jewish students in the aftermath of pro-Palestinian protests on campus.

Under the terms of Northwestern's agreement, the university must provide the government with detailed admissions data, better enforce its campus demonstration policies, and conduct a campus-climate survey that asks students how they feel the university handles antisemitism. The university will also pay the government \$75 million.

Northwestern, which has a sizable population of international students hailing from 120 countries, also agreed to ask foreign applicants why they want to study in the United States and, upon request, provide the government with international students' disciplinary records.

Trump's administration has deported some international students who participated in Gaza-war protests and railed against colleges offering in-state tuition rates to foreign-born students.

At the same time, civil dialogue is en vogue. Over the last several years, colleges have asked student applicants to describe how they've navigated disagreements, [ramped up](#) civil- and constructive-dialogue courses, and established civic-education [centers](#).

In March, after being placed under a similar investigation by the Education and Justice Departments, Columbia University agreed to “develop training materials to socialize all students to campus norms and values more broadly.”

Northwestern did not respond to emailed questions from *The Chronicle*. Based on the language in the agreement, which states only that the university will “develop training materials to socialize international students to the norms of a campus

dedicated to free inquiry and open debate,” it’s unclear why administrators agreed to develop training material only for international students, how or if the training materials will be used, or how administrators define free inquiry and open debate.

According to an [online schedule](#), Northwestern’s international-student orientation includes a variety of activities, including visiting Chicago’s neighborhoods, hearing about tax obligations in the United States, and learning about campus services.

Orientation programs for international students typically don’t include lessons on free-inquiry and civil-discourse topics, experts said.

Educating students in free inquiry and open debate can help cement the importance of those values, said Fanta Aw, executive director and chief executive of NAFSA: Association of International Educators. But she’s skeptical of the Trump administration’s intentions.

“I think all students can benefit from learning more about First Amendment rights and how they work, and what it means to be in a culture where academic freedom prevails,” Aw said. “I think it begs the larger question, What is the problem that is trying to be fixed related to international students?”

One of the central reasons students travel across the world and leave their support systems behind to attend college in the United States, Aw pointed out, is because they understand that the United States fosters free inquiry. Singling them out implies that their intentions are in some ways dubious, she said, “and yet there’s really very little evidence to actually support that.”

On the other hand, training international students in free inquiry could help them better use classroom resources like office hours and let them know it’s OK to ask questions during class, said Katie Koo, an associate professor in the department of counseling and human-development services at the University of Georgia who researches underrepresented students’ experiences. (In some Asian cultures, Koo said, asking questions of an authority figure like a professor or teaching assistant is seen as doubting that person’s knowledge.)

“They’re not used to those class norms and the class culture, asking questions, reaching out to professors,” Koo said. “It’s very difficult for them to take time to approach professors.”

Debate is also an unfamiliar word for some international students, who can interpret it as meaning a disagreement, and see it as a

negative activity, Koo said. Open-debate training may help dispel that assumption.

Dubinina, the Northwestern student from Belarus, thinks the provision generalizes international students' experiences. A training, she said, would be ineffective.

"I want to have this kind of open debate happening in class with my professors and have it integrated into course content," she said. "I don't want to be taught about how to think."

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About the Author

**Sonel Cutler**

Sonel Cutler is a reporting fellow at *The Chronicle*. Follow her on X [@Sonel\\_Cutler](#).