
Latitudes: For OPT, frontal attacks and an end run

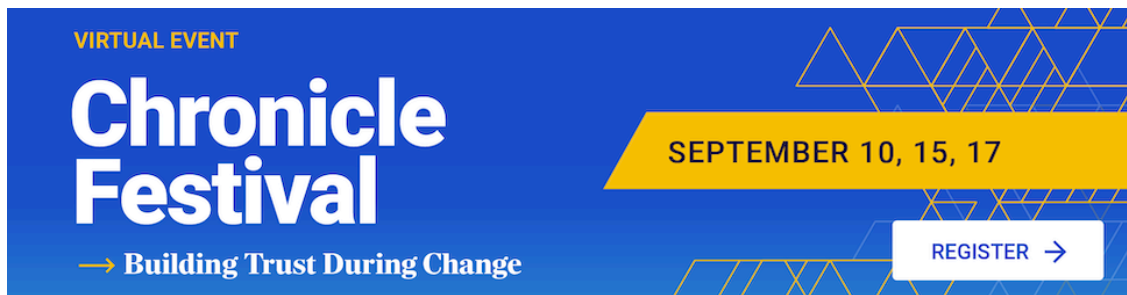
1 message

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Wed, May 13,
2026 at 11:00
AM

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A blue banner for the Chronicle Festival. On the left, it says "VIRTUAL EVENT" in small yellow text, followed by "Chronicle Festival" in large white text, and "→ Building Trust During Change" in smaller white text. On the right, a yellow banner contains the dates "SEPTEMBER 10, 15, 17". In the bottom right corner, there is a white button with the text "REGISTER →". The background features a pattern of white geometric shapes.

THE
CHRONICLE
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EDUCATION

Latitudes



By Karin Fischer

In this week's Latitudes: After a professor spoke out against the deportation of a postdoc, his lab was locked down. Foreign-student declines across the Big 4. The latest on duration of status. But first ...

'A MAGNET FOR FRAUD'

A top official with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security called optional practical training "a magnet for fraud" and promised during a [Tuesday news conference](#) to "relentlessly investigate" wrongdoing in the work program for international graduates of American colleges.

The remarks by Todd M. Lyons, acting director for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, are yet another sign that the program, known as OPT, is under scrutiny by the Trump administration and could face reform or even elimination.

Lyons said that investigations over the past year had identified more than 10,000 students working for “highly suspect” employers. “We’ve discovered empty buildings and locked doors at addresses where hundreds of foreign students are allegedly employed,” he said.

Some work sites visited by agents have turned out to be residences or post-office boxes, and multiple employers have claimed to be located at a single address. They’ve also found instances of “phantom employees,” people who have obtained work authorization through OPT but never showed up at the companies they claimed to be working for.

OPT allows students to stay in the United States for up to three years after they earn their degree to gain work experience in a field related to their major. In 2024, nearly 295,000 graduates took part in OPT — or about one in every four student-visa holders.

The ability to gain hands-on experience through OPT is a major reason many students choose the United States, and restrictions on the program could be yet another setback for colleges trying to maintain international enrollments.

For months, there have been reports of an increase in site visits by immigration officers. Last week, agents investigated 18 employers in northern Texas, said John A. Condon, acting executive associate director for Homeland Security Investigations.

Condon said officials believe that networks are “farming out” workers on OPT to unreported third-party employers, “making oversight nearly impossible and raising serious national-security issues.”

Lyons called the activities “deliberate, coordinated, and criminal” and said the government had intensified vetting of student-visa applicants at consular posts overseas for document fraud and unauthorized employment. He did not detail other enforcement actions during the news conference.

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VISA-RULE CHANGES: MORE QUESTIONS

To give you a glimpse behind the curtain, I was just about to wrap up writing this week's newsletter when I learned of the Homeland Security news conference. On one hand: timely news. On the other: seat-of-the-pants rewrites.

My original plan had been to highlight a [new article](#) in *The Chronicle* about the Trump administration's plan to impose fixed deadlines for foreign students to leave the United States. The piece is an explainer for your colleagues not steeped in international education about why a seemingly obscure visa-rule change is actually kind of a big deal.

For those of you who *are* steeped, I highlighted two questions raised in my reporting that didn't end up in the story ... including one about OPT.

What's the rule change meant to fix? The Department of Homeland Security argues that limiting visa validity will build opportunities into the system for immigration officers to scrutinize students for fraud and national-security risks. But unlike other classes of visa holders, international students are already tracked in a federal database, the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System.

Are officials suggesting that SEVIS, which has been around since shortly after the September 11 terror attacks, is insufficient or glitchy? If so, why not make fixes to SEVIS itself? That solution would seem to be more straightforward and less likely to be challenged in court, while the rule's critics are already preparing for a legal fight. (I sent this and other questions to the Homeland Security press office but did not get a response.)

Is this a back-door attack on optional practical training? Since President Trump's first term, people have been anticipating that the administration would take action on OPT.

While the rule's focus isn't OPT, it could still have a great impact: As drafted, the proposal would require almost all students to apply for a visa extension to work on OPT. As a result, it could become a bottleneck, and delays, whether unintentional or deliberate, could force time-limited students to leave the country. The lack of surety

could also dissuade potential students who put a high value on gaining work experience from studying in the United States.

In [public comments](#), at least one group urged the the department to ditch OPT as part of the rule change. The Center for Immigration Studies is on record arguing that the program was created illegally and takes jobs from Americans. But given high OPT participation rates, Elizabeth Jacobs, the CIS's director of regulatory affairs and policy, told me that doing away with it could also reduce the administrative burden caused by the new regulation.

Readers, I'd be interested in your thoughts and questions about the proposed rule. As always, you can email me at karin.fischer@chronicle.com.

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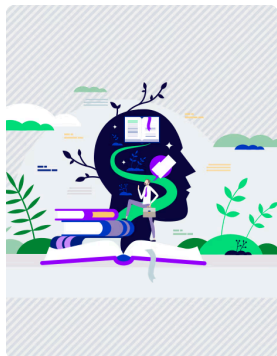
WAS A LAB LOCKDOWN RETALIATION?

An Indiana University biology professor who criticized the U.S. government's deportation of Chinese scientists has been locked out of his lab at the Bloomington campus amid a federal investigation.

Roger W. Innes had spoken out on behalf of Chinese postdocs accused of smuggling biological materials into the United States, saying that the samples did not "pose any risk" to Americans, contradicting U.S. Department of Justice claims of a national-security threat.

Neither federal nor campus officials have offered a reason for the lab closure, but Innes [told](#) my colleague Megan Zahneis that it was an "attempt by the current administration to silence people that question their activities."

UPCOMING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP | MAY 2026



The Chronicle's Higher-Ed Mental Health Forum

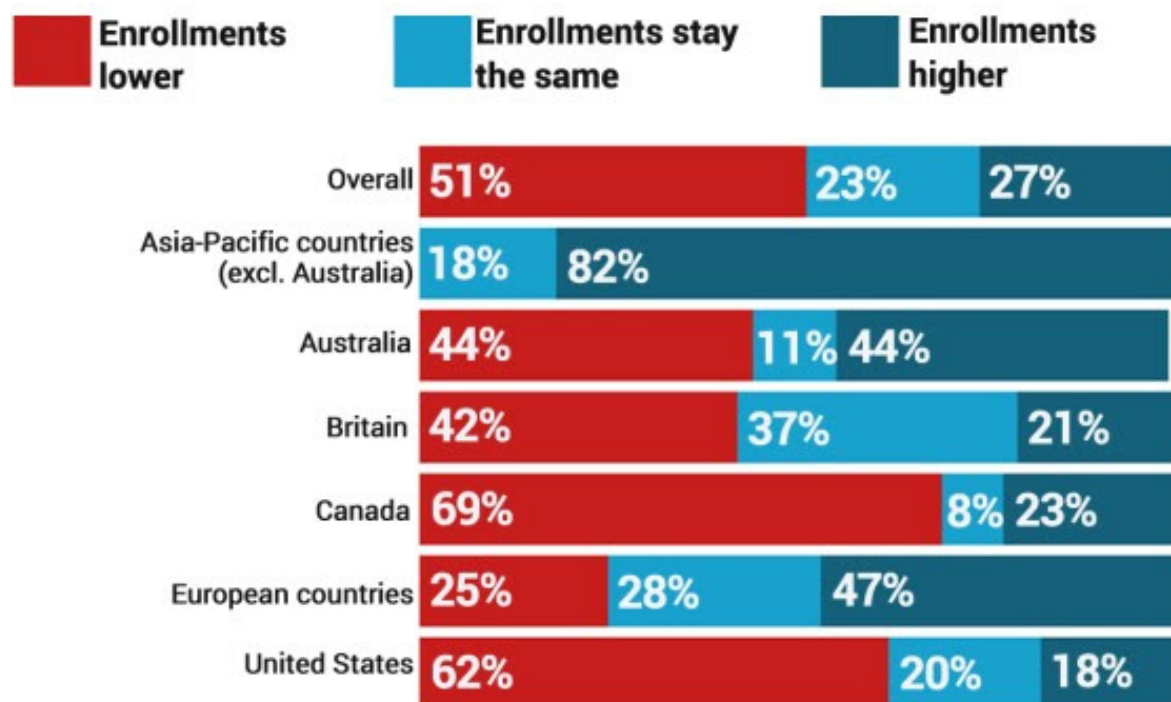
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INTEREST IN TRADITIONAL DESTINATIONS COOLS

International enrollments have dropped at colleges in all four of the major English-speaking destinations.

The hardest hit is Canada, where 69 percent of institutions said undergraduate enrollments were down and 80 percent reported a drop at the graduate level.

Six in 10 American respondents to the [Global Enrollment Benchmark survey](#) said foreign enrollments had declined across academic levels. Restrictive government and visa policies were cited as the top obstacle in all four countries.



Institutions in Europe and Asia Pacific saw enrollment gains from overseas.

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The second Trump administration's slashing of support for academic research has left universities in disarray. [Order this report](#) to explore how institutions are recalibrating their research agendas in an uncertain funding climate.

AROUND THE GLOBE

The U.S. Department of Justice is [appealing](#) a federal judge's ruling to dismiss a case challenging Minnesota's state tuition benefits for undocumented students.

Higher-education groups are asking the U.S. Department of State to [prioritize](#) the processing of student visas over the summer.

Senate Democrats want Congress to [reverse](#) cuts to academic- and cultural-exchange programs proposed by President Trump and to include language blocking the administration from unilaterally freezing already-appropriated spending.

Cheryl Delk-Le Good, the longtime executive director of EnglishUSA, plans to [retire](#) at the end of the year from the organization that supports English-language programs.

Israel's education minister wants college presidents to [pledge](#) to keep politics off campus.

Thanks for reading. I always welcome your feedback and ideas for future reporting, so drop me a line at karin.fischer@chronicle.com or message me confidentially at [Signal](#). You can also connect with me on [X](#), [LinkedIn](#), or [Bluesky](#). If you like this newsletter, please share it with colleagues and friends. They can [sign up here](#).

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