

July 16, 2026

Homeland Security Limits How Long International Students Can Stay in U.S.

International students previously could stay as long as their program lasted. The Trump administration is ending that 1978 policy.

By Johanna Alonso



Critics of the policy say it could deter international students from studying in the United States.

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The U.S. Department of Homeland Security on Thursday scrapped a long-standing policy that allowed international students to stay in the U.S. until they finish their program of study. The new rule will limit their stay in the country to just four years unless they receive an extension, as well as restrict students' ability to change majors and institutions once they've arrived.

International education leaders and experts have argued that four years is not enough time for a significant number of students to complete their degrees; almost all Ph.D. programs are longer than four years, while the average undergraduate takes more than four years to complete their bachelor's degree. Additionally, students pursuing optional practical training, the work authorization for F-1 students following their graduation, typically stay in the U.S. more than four years.

But the government has argued that the old policy known as duration of status allowed students to stay in the U.S. indefinitely without having to interact with immigration officials, leading to overstays and national security concerns. According to DHS, 2,100 international students who entered the country on an F-1 visa between 2000 and 2010 are still in the country with F-1 status.



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DHS officials did recognize in the final rule that students could take longer than four years to complete their programs of study, but they argued the change is “intended as a law enforcement and screening tool to assess whether a student is maintaining normal academic progress and eligibility for F-1 status.”

Officials added that “nothing in this rule would prevent students from continuing their studies and research as long as individual students are complying with the terms of their nonimmigrant classification. Long-standing policy, which is not changing, allows F-1 and J-1 students to continue their studies for as long as their [extension of stay] application is pending.”

International students already in the country can “remain through their current program period or up to four additional years.”

The first Trump administration also sought to end duration of status, but it was struck down after former President Biden took office. The policy proposal returned late last summer, receiving nearly 22,000 comments, most of them opposing the change. Institutions argued that most Ph.D. students need more than four years to complete their degrees, and hospital leaders spoke to the important role that doctors on J-1 visas play in the health-care system, among other comments.

The rule is slated to take effect Sept. 15, two months after it was finalized.

“For decades, foreign students have been admitted into the U.S. indefinitely, allowing thousands to abuse our immigration system by perpetually enrolling in courses to avoid having to leave the U.S.,” DHS Secretary Markwayne Mullin said in a department news release. “By implementing clear, finite limits on these visas, the United States is reclaiming its ability to properly screen, vet, and monitor individuals within our borders. This final rule ensures that foreign students remain focused on their primary purpose: completing their studies and returning home.”

‘Misguided and Unnecessary’

The end of duration of status is the latest in the Trump administration’s crackdown on international students, including the termination of thousands of students’ statuses in the Student Exchange and Visitor Information System in spring 2025, implementing new social media screenings for

applicants, rejecting record-high numbers of visa applications, and more. Since early in Trump's second term, international education experts have warned that these actions could lead to a decline in international enrollment, leading institutions to struggle to meet enrollment and revenue goals, as well as impacting the U.S.'s ability to recruit top students and scholars to contribute to American research and innovation. As expected, the number of international students in the U.S. declined in fall 2025, as did the number of new student visas awarded.

The release of the final rule prompted immediate backlash from international education leaders and advocates; several critics noted that international students are already monitored at a higher level than any other nonimmigrant population in the U.S. through SEVIS, a digital records system.

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Fanta Aw, CEO of NAFSA: Association of International Educators, called it “a misguided and unnecessary policy shift that injects uncertainty, bureaucracy, and fear into a system that has long worked effectively.” Her statement also criticized the federal government for inserting itself into students’ academic decision-making processes regarding changing majors and transferring institutions.

The American Immigration Lawyers Association lambasted the rule on social media. The organization wrote that the rule “duplicates processes already managed through SEVIS” and that the rule change is part of the Trump administration’s larger effort to “[dismantle] the legal immigration system, potentially creating a larger undocumented population and ultimately undermining the very economic and security foundations the Administration claims to protect.”

Zuzana C. Wootson, deputy director of federal policy at the Presidents’ Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, emphasized the negative impact the rule could have on the nation’s “economy and global competitiveness.”

“International students, scholars, and exchange visitors contribute economically, intellectually, and culturally to American society. They drive innovation, create jobs, and

advance groundbreaking research, creating opportunities for Americans. They deserve assurance that their admission period to the U.S. will conform to the requirements of their academic programs,” she said in a statement. “At a time when international student enrollment is already declining, we should be welcoming the best and brightest—not erecting new barriers that limit opportunity and innovation.”

A few Republican legislators celebrated the rule change on social media. Rick Brattin, a Missouri state senator who is currently running for Congress, wrote on X that he supported the regulation, writing, “This ends the ‘duration of status’ loophole, stops visa abuse, and puts real vetting back in place which is important for national security.”

Another Missouri Republican, U.S. Sen. Eric Schmitt, lauded the rule for ending a phenomenon he referred to as “forever students,” international students who continue enrolling in classes to stay in the U.S. indefinitely.

Uncertainty and Administrative Burden

F-1 students—international students pursuing a degree at an institution of higher education in the U.S.—have been granted duration of status since 1979, before which they had to reapply annually. The 1978 regulation that created the policy stated that the rule aimed to “facilitate the admission” of international students without overburdening the workload of what was then called the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Now, overburdening immigration officials is one of the key concerns that international education experts have raised regarding the new rule. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services currently has a backlog of over 11.65 million cases as of the final quarter of 2025, according to the American Immigration Council's [USCIS tracker](#), and the average processing time is over a year. Requiring international students to file extensions could exacerbate that backlog, and delays in processing those extensions could leave students in limbo—unsure whether they can continue their education.

“We have little faith that USCIS can actually respond to the volume and tsunami of program extensions ... If USCIS says, ‘Well, we’re going to be able to turn this around in X period of time,’ I do not believe a single word of it,” Aw told *Inside Higher Ed* prior to the rule’s finalization. “I do not. They’ve not been able to do it before.”

Delo Blough, a retired director of international services, said earlier this year she is most concerned about how many extensions will even be approved. The regulation states that decisions about extensions are discretionary; it’s unclear, in practice, whether the majority of the extensions will be granted or if officers will be more selective. Blough noted that the government and individual immigration officials may not have a good understanding of the legitimate reasons a student needs more than four years to complete their degree, leading to high rates of denials that cannot be appealed.

Blough said this rule could further diminish the number of international students studying in the U.S., which is already in decline after the Trump administration's repeated attacks on international students.

“If they’re going to be very strict on ‘We’re only going to give very limited cases after four years,’ then we’re going to lose a lot of [international] graduate students,” she said. “That’s the reality, because not all programs are going to be able to adjust to that.”

Written By



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