

August 24, 2026

How New Visa Limits Are Already Affecting Colleges

Fifteen colleges, universities and university systems submitted testimony explaining how the rule, which allows international students to stay in the U.S. for only four years without an extension, is already impacting their campuses.

By [Johanna Alonso](#)



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One student who withdrew from the University of Madison-Wisconsin wrote, “A significant factor in my decision was the recently published DHS final rule.”

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International applicants dropped by over 25 percent at Illinois’s flagship university and several dozen international students withdrew from the University of Maryland, Baltimore, just weeks before the start of the semester.

Those are just two of the ways colleges said, in court filings, that new limits on how long international students can stay in the U.S. are already having an effect, even before the rule officially kicks in next month. Under the rule, international students can stay for only four years before seeking an extension. Previously, they could remain in the country until their studies were completed.

A lawsuit filed last week is aiming to stop the controversial rule before the Sept. 15 start date; the plaintiffs argue that the Department of Homeland Security did not adequately consider the impacts of the rule before finalizing it.

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Fourteen colleges and universities, plus the University of California system, submitted declarations to the court outlining what they described as irreparable harms that could come as a result of the rule. The declarations are included in the plaintiffs’ motion asking the judge to stop it from taking effect in September.

Among those harms: huge costs, including hiring new staff or updating digital systems that were built around the previous regulations; declines in enrollment from international students who don’t want to come to a country where they may not be able to complete their degrees; a loss of revenue from those students’ tuition; significant blows to research infrastructure that relies on the same graduate students sticking with a project for, often, longer than four years; and more.

Colleges and universities have been sounding the alarm about these impacts since the rule was first proposed about a year ago. But now, just a month after the rule was finalized, they say those fears are already coming to fruition.

Enrollment Declines

Many of the institutions emphasized that not only do they anticipate the four-year limit to impact enrollment in future semesters, but also that they’re already seeing the effects this fall. The institutions that submitted declarations range from small liberal arts colleges to flagship public universities and have international student populations ranging from 6 percent to 39 percent of their student bodies.

Seven colleges and universities said they have seen dips in international applications and/or enrollments this fall. These declines may not all be attributable to the new regulation; international enrollment declined last fall, too, as a result of other Trump administration policies and international students’ fears about moving to the U.S. during a crackdown on the presence of noncitizens broadly.

But every university noted that both current and prospective students have already approached staffers with questions and concerns about how the rule will impact them. And, in a handful of cases, students who withdrew or deferred their acceptance told the institution the end of duration of status was a factor.

What colleges said about how the end of duration of status is impacting international enrollment

Institution	Enrollment data
Grinnell College	15.8 percentage point decline in international student yield from fall 2023 to fall 2026
University of Illinois Chicago	50 percent decline in admitted international students over historic levels
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign	25.1 percent decline in international graduate applicants from 2025 to 2026 cycle
University of Maryland, Baltimore	37.9 percent decline in new international student enrollment from fall 2024 to fall 2025. Thirty-two students admitted for fall 2026 have withdrawn applications, and 14 have requested to defer their admission.
University of Maryland, College Park	anticipated 30 percent decline in new international graduate students year over year
University of Wisconsin–Madison	10.9 percent year-over-year decline in undergraduate applications, and 27 percent year-over-year decline in graduate applications. Five undergraduate students who put down deposits have since withdrawn.
University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee	42 percent decrease in applications, 29 percent decrease in admissions and 38.7 percent decrease in enrollments year over year

Table: Johanna Alonso/Inside Higher Ed • Source: [Declarations in Presidents’ Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration v. United States Department of Homeland Security](#) • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

“After careful consideration, I have made the difficult decision to withdraw from the program and not proceed with my plan to study in the United States,” one student who had committed to the University of Wisconsin–Madison wrote to the institution, per the court document. “A significant factor in my decision was the recently published DHS final rule ... after weighing these circumstances carefully, I do not feel that I can proceed with my studies in the United States as originally planned and I won’t come to United States this academic year.”



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Several of the declarations also noted that, anecdotally, once an international student has opted to study in another country, it’s extremely unlikely they’ll return to the U.S. institution they turned down, even if circumstances change.

The rule does allow students to apply to extend their time in the U.S. beyond four years for a few specific reasons, including compelling academic reasons. But DHS hasn’t been clear about what, exactly, that means. Opponents also worry that U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, which will be responsible for reviewing those extension requests, won’t be able to handle the surge of applications; the agency currently has a processing backlog of over a year.

Institutions noted that international students are worried about being unable to complete their degrees if USCIS denies an extension request. Grinnell College’s declaration, for example, said students may take longer to complete their studies if they fail a course. Although that’s a relatively common occurrence, USCIS may not find it a “compelling” reason to stay in the country.

Some institutions noted that this rule cuts off pathways to their institutions; Reed College said that many of its international undergraduates were previously at a high school in the U.S. If those students cannot get extensions to continue in the U.S. past high school, that pipeline, which supplies a significant number of international students to Reed, will be cut off.

These declines in applications and enrollments also lead to a loss of revenue for institutions. Grinnell said it earns \$10 million from international students’ tuition, and that any dip in that number “will place undue financial strain on the College’s operations.”

Lost revenue isn’t the only financial impact the rule could have. Some institutions outlined the additional costs they expect to incur. The University of Pennsylvania said it could cost between half a million and a million dollars to update its digital system for international students. UW-Madison estimated \$600,000 for legal fees and other costs associated with compliance.

Other inadvertent impacts of an enrollment decline are expected. The University of Maryland, Baltimore, wrote that, if the number of Ph.D. students declines because of a

drop in international enrollment, it could lose its designation as a Carnegie R-1 university, as R-1s must confer 70 Ph.D.s annually.

Programs and Mobility

The institutions each said a substantial number of their students will be incapable of completing their studies within the four-year limit. The limit will especially impact doctoral students, nearly 100 percent of whom take more than four years to graduate, as well as undergraduates who may need more than four years for a variety of reasons.

Additionally, some institutions noted that they offer special programs designed to take longer than four years that will be disrupted by the rule. Grinnell offers a 3-2 program that allows engineering students to complete three years at Grinnell before finishing their final two years at one of four engineering schools, including Columbia University or California Institute of Technology. They then graduate with bachelor's degrees from both institutions. Grinnell President Anne F. Harris noted that one current international student was told by a partner institution that they may not be able to complete the program.

Cornell University, meanwhile, wrote that its undergraduate architecture program, which takes five years, and its 4+1 combined bachelor's and master's programs will be impacted.

"International students wishing to enroll in these programs will face uncertainty as to whether they will be able to maintain their immigration status throughout the duration of the program," wrote Wendy Wolford, vice provost for international affairs. "This is expected to make these formerly very successful pathways significantly less attractive to international students and potentially reduce enrollment."

Similarly, the colleges stressed that the new rule's restrictions on students changing their program or institution are unrealistic. Under the regulation, graduate students couldn't change their program of study at all, while undergraduates would not be allowed to do so within their first year.

Colleges emphasized that graduate students change their program objectives often, such as switching from a master's to a Ph.D. or vice versa. At UW-Madison, about one in five international doctoral students started in a master's program, for instance.

But in some cases, those changes are an inherent part of a particular course of study. Boston University offers a five-year dual-degree program in which students graduate with both a medical degree and a master of business administration degree. To participate, students must first enroll in the medical school before separately applying to the business school, the university's provost, Colin S. Duckett, said in the declaration, which may violate the new regulation.

"Changes to the structure of Boston University's academic programs are costly and burdensome to implement, and, once made, difficult to unwind, as frequent changes to

program structure undermine the stability of the university’s academic programs," he wrote.

Susan-Ellis Dougherty, who leads International Student and Scholar Services at the University of Maryland, College Park, also emphasized the negative effects of disallowing undergraduates to switch majors in their first year.

“In higher education, the first year of study is designed as a foundational period for exploration. Forcing undergraduates to remain frozen in an initial major chosen prior to matriculation destroys their academic autonomy,” she wrote.

Overworked Offices

Finally, institutions stressed how burdensome the regulation will be—and has already been—on their international student services offices.

Many of the declarations said students have been inundating these offices with questions about what the rule means and how it will affect them.

“The university is currently committing personnel and administrative resources to understanding the rule, identifying affected students and programs, developing institutional guidance, and evaluating whether modifications to existing programs and practices may be required,” wrote Chancellor Charles L. Isbell Jr. of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. “These activities are being undertaken solely because of the challenged rule.”

What colleges said about how the rule will impact their international student services offices

Institution	Burden on international student services
Cornell University	an additional workload of approximately 5,250 hours per year
Grinnell College	326.25 staff hours each year, costing \$84,401.25 annually
Oregon State University	1,072 staff hours in the first year, even before calculating case-specific extension work, campus partner training, business-process development, software configuration or complex case response
Reed College	38 extension-of-stay requests filed annually, plus 135 hours of staff training
University of Maryland, Baltimore	120 extension-of-stay requests filed annually, plus 100 hours of staff training
University of Maryland, College Park	400 extension-of-stay requests filed annually, plus 120 hours of staff training and hiring two new staff members
University of Wisconsin–Madison	2,000 extension-of-stay requests filed annually, plus 100 hours of staff training and hiring one new staff member

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The colleges and universities projected how much additional work will be required to accommodate the rule change, particularly when it comes to filing the extension-of-status requests. Cornell, for example, will have to advise 3,500 students on extensions of status annually. UW-Madison's declaration did not provide a specific number, but noted that 2,100 international students are enrolled in programs designed to take longer than four years, and another 500 students are likely to take longer than four years to complete a four-year program.

Colleges estimated that this work will take hundreds of hours, as will developing new trainings, policies, digital systems, communications with students. In some cases, new staff will have to be hired to accommodate those changes.

One of the biggest impacts, though, may be to institutions' reputations as world-renowned research.

"In UMD's efforts to compete in a global marketplace for academic talent, it is seriously harmed when its identity as a U.S. institution becomes a hinderance rather than an asset," Dougherty wrote. "These harms are difficult to quantify but diminish UMD's ability to recruit and retain academic talent, and ultimately to fulfill its research and educational objectives."

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