
Latitudes: Contending with a stressful, new normal

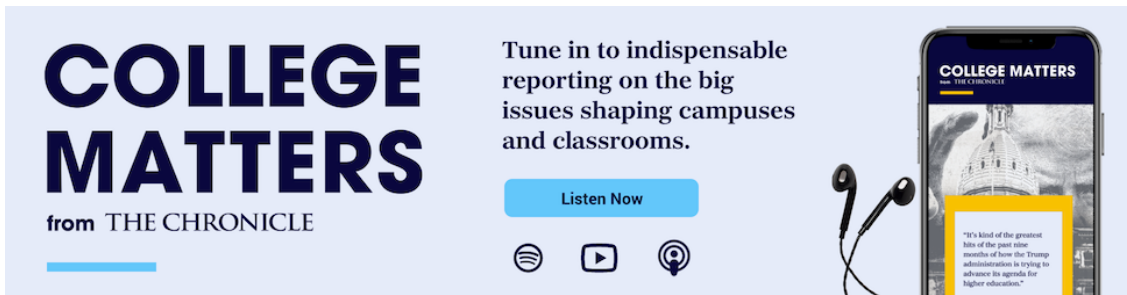
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Smartphone mockup showing the College Matters podcast cover with a quote: "It's kind of the greatest hits of the past nine months of how the Trump administration is trying to advance its agenda for higher education."

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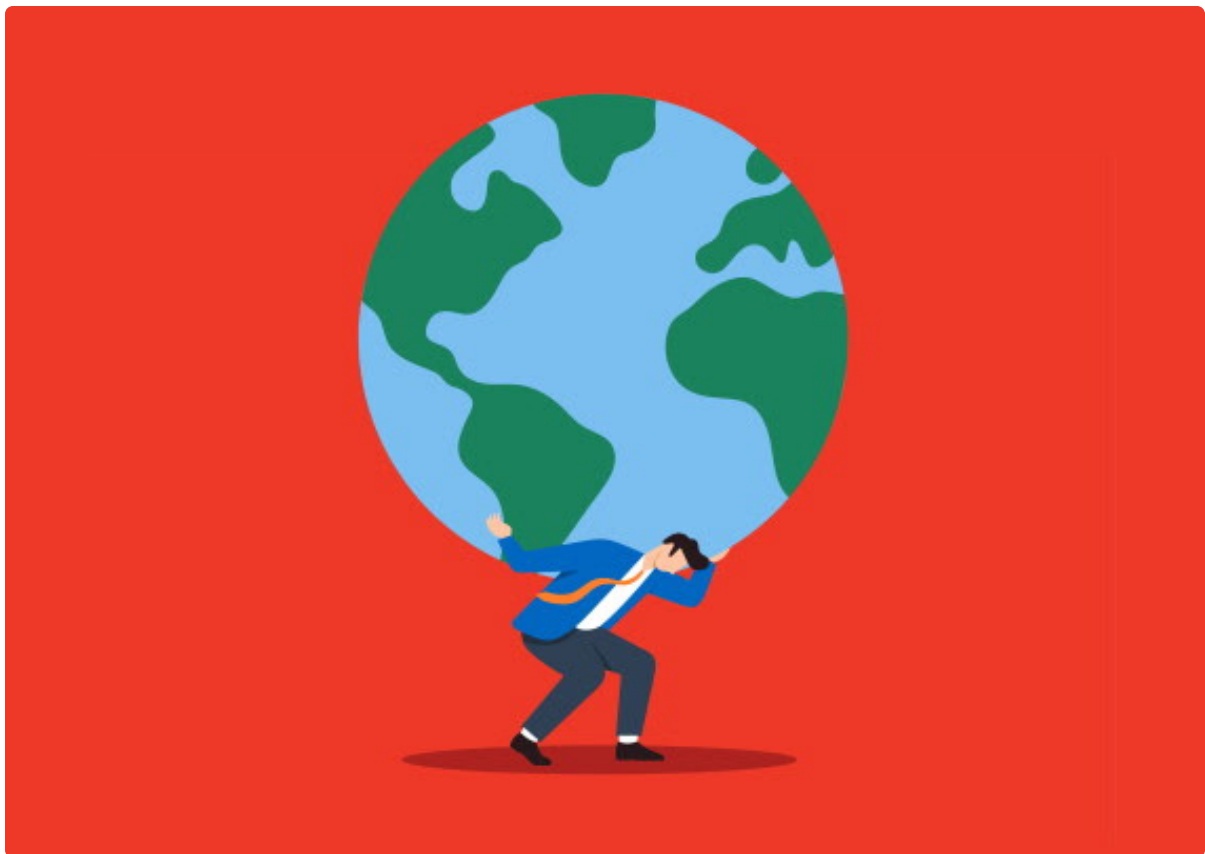
Latitudes



By Karin Fischer

In this week's Latitudes: A judge rules for foreign students in a free-speech case. More lawsuits over tuition benefits for undocumented students. One university ends a China program. But first ...

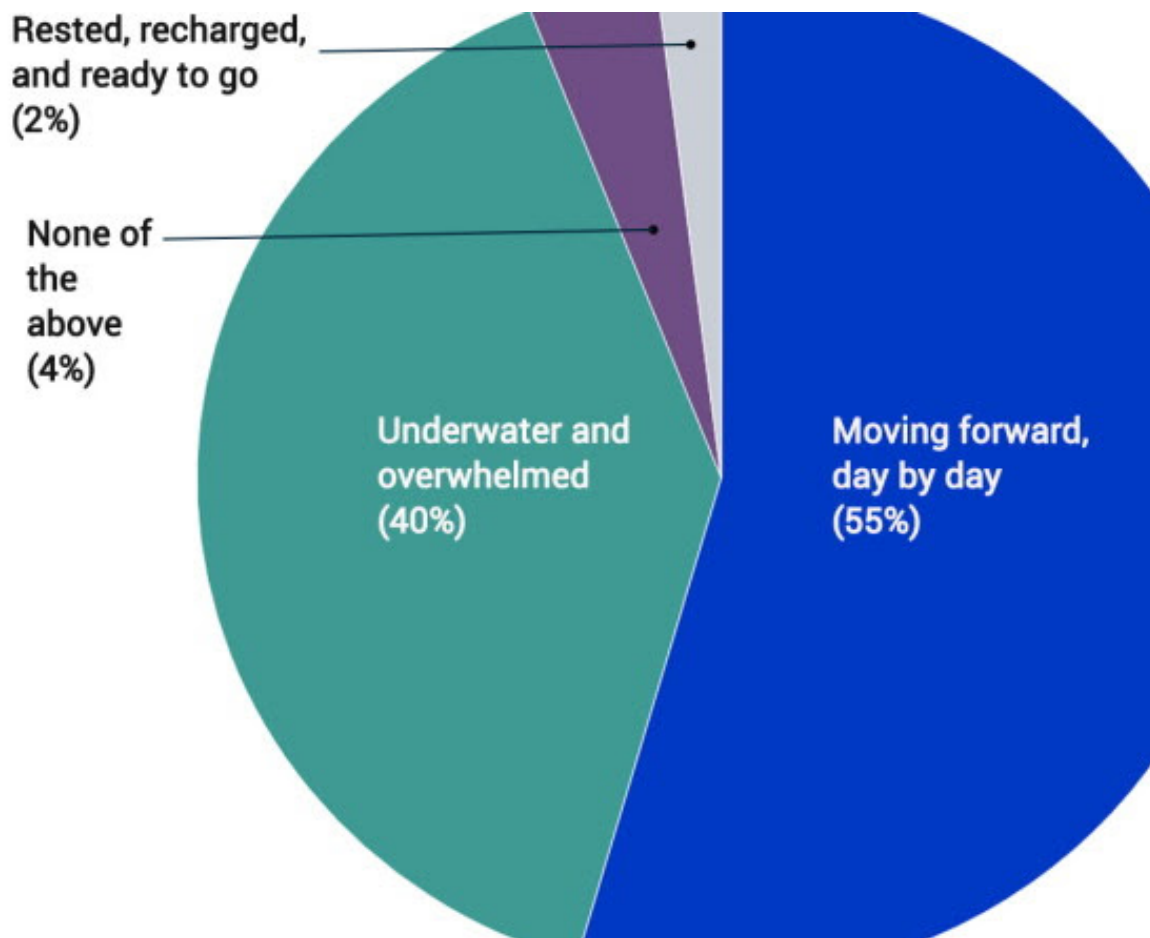
'I DON'T REMEMBER WHAT NORMAL FEELS LIKE'



Federal-policy changes and other pressures are causing widespread stress and anxiety among international educators.

Four in 10 respondents to a recent Latitudes flash survey said they felt “underwater and overwhelmed” in their jobs, while another 55 percent said they were “moving forward, day by day.” Just two percent said they would describe their mindset as “rested, recharged, and ready to go.”

More than 350 readers participated in the survey, which asked about their state of mind as the new academic year begins.



“Stressed just to take a week off,” wrote a director of international-student services. “We constantly pivot to a changing federal landscape and stricter compliance decisions that will increase questions and concerns. And the cycle never stops.”

“It’s been so long since life has felt calm,” another respondent wrote. “I don’t remember what normal feels like. This *is* normal.”

A third said they had recently gone to the emergency room, worried that they were having a heart attack: “Turns out it was ulcers due to stress. Never had ulcers before.”

I’ve noticed that work-related stress has become a near-constant thread in my interviews and casual conversation with international educators, as commonplace as remarking on the weather. It reminds me of the pervasiveness of pandemic burnout, a subject I [wrote about](#) back in 2022.

This time, there’s no public-health crisis, but among the challenges flagged by readers are visa delays, new federal rules, conflicting legal guidance, and funding instability — along with the difficulty of trying to make sense of it all for the rest of campus.

In responding to the Latitudes survey, many of you also shared your strategies for coping.

Exercise is a big outlet, including Pilates, tai chi, weight lifting, swimming, and hot yoga. Seven of you are training for half marathons, one is planning a full, and dozens are getting out and going for a walk. “Lifting heavy things won’t necessarily fix all of our problems,” wrote a reader who is working with a personal trainer. “But being a little stronger and more resilient surely couldn’t hurt.”

Picking up a new hobby or rediscovering an old one is a popular choice. You’re painting, knitting, gardening, cooking, and learning other languages. One person has gotten into 3D puzzles.

Readers are compartmentalizing, leaving the laptop at work, observing email-free days, and listening to audiobooks at lunch. Family time matters. “Jumping off the diving board into the pool with my kids is my new stress relief,” said a respondent. “Work hard, play hard! CANNONBALL!!!”

Therapy is an answer for some, while one reader keeps an “encouragement folder” on the computer to read through on rough days. Pet a dog, cat, or even a pet rat, you advise.

People are sleeping more and eating cleanly. They are also baking, trying new recipes, and treating themselves to dinners out. “Wine,” wrote a respondent. “That’s it, and it’s probably not healthy, but I’m losing my mind.”

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THREE TAKES ON STRESS MANAGEMENT

I asked a few readers to tell me a little more about their methods for chilling out and slowing down. Responses have been edited for length and clarity.

Mark Lenhart, president and founder of CET Academic Travel, moonlights as a fitness instructor. He teaches spin and strength-training classes that incorporate music and choreography.

Were you always a regular exerciser?

I've always enjoyed working out. It's helpful to intentionally stop thinking about study abroad for an hour or two each day and instead pick up some weights or go for a run. I honestly think working out benefits my mental health as much as it does my physical well-being.

Is there something you get out of teaching that is different from exercising on your own?

All of the classes that I teach require me to perform the workouts on a stage, so there's a higher level of accountability. I must prepare for class, I need to make sure my form and cues are correct, and I must bring a certain level of enthusiasm to engage and challenge the participants. It's not unlike presenting at a conference: I need to understand the material backwards and forwards in order to share it effectively with the audience. It can be a humbling experience, and that has benefits too!

When your passion becomes a part-time job, showing up is a requirement. I can't just opt out. I've chosen early-morning and weekend class times to minimize the impact on my work and family life. I'm lucky — my team at CET and my family understand that teaching helps me perform at my best. And sometimes I can even convince international-education friends to join my classes.

Roopa Rawjee, executive director of the Office of International Engagement at Illinois State University, swears by a monthly massage. "A good therapist will immediately find the knots in my shoulders — yes, this is where I hold my stress," she said.

I love the idea of targeting the physical consequences of stress.

A monthly massage has become a wellness non-negotiable. I look forward to quiet time on the massage table and to meditating to my favorite Hindu mantra. I emerge rested, relieved, and rejuvenated.

What's your secret to carving out time for self-care?

As an Indian, and a woman raised in fairly traditional values, I have had to work on my mind and body to manage the guilt or perception that I'm being "selfish" to disengage and focus on myself. I plan ahead, make sure tasks are completed, and very much appreciate my supportive partner. Self-awareness and reflection are an integral part of the practice.

What are your weekend plans?

All I want this weekend is comfy clothes and crime shows!

Molly Heidmann, director of international-student services at Miami University, in Ohio, celebrates the “glimmers” in daily life. Supportive friends also lift her spirits.

“Glimmers” isn’t a term I know — tell me more.

For those who aren’t familiar, “glimmers” are micromoments of joy that can calm the nervous system and spark a sense of well-being.

What are some examples?

For me, this can be noticing the sun or breeze on my face, the blue sky, the taste of my favorite hot tea, or a smile from someone walking by. I try to take a moment to not only notice these things, but to feel a sense of gratitude for them.

Sometimes I close my office door, turn off the lights, and do some stretching, breath work, or a short meditation. I remind myself that I’m going to be more effective if I am grounded and regulated, so I consider these breaks to be vital.

JUDGE RULES IN FAVOR OF FOREIGN STUDENT JOURNALISTS

A federal judge [ruled](#) that the Trump administration’s efforts to deport international students over campus protests violate the First Amendment rights of student journalists who are not American citizens.

The Stanford Daily, which filed the [lawsuit](#) along with several students, said that reporters and editors on student visas self-censored or quit because of concern that the federal government could retaliate against them for what they published.

“In the United States, free speech, including the freedom to criticize the government and its leaders, is not a sign of our democracy’s fragility. It is evidence of its strength,” Noël Wise, a federal district-court judge in California, wrote in a 90-page opinion. “That strength is diminished when members of our society — citizens and noncitizens alike — must self-censor and ‘behave’ or suffer the government’s retaliation.”

Wise said a provision of immigration law invoked by the administration was unconstitutional and overly vague.

A federal court in Massachusetts had previously [decided in favor](#) of international students and scholars in a related case.



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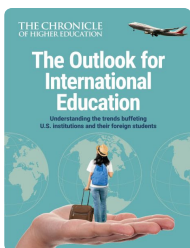
PERSON TO WATCH

The leader of a group that advocates for international and immigrant students is featured in *The Chronicle's* inaugural People to Watch issue.

Miriam Feldblum, co-founder of the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, is among 16 leaders recognized because their work illuminates some of the biggest shifts and challenges facing higher education. The Presidents' Alliance has challenged Trump policies on immigration and student visas in court and is working to shape public opinion.

[Read more in my profile of Feldblum.](#)

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The Outlook for International Education

International students are a vital piece of the enrollment puzzle in American higher ed. But worrisome signs have emerged this year.

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AROUND THE GLOBE

The U.S. government has [sued](#) four more states — Arizona, New Mexico, Oregon, and Washington — over state-level policies providing college-tuition benefits to undocumented students.

A group of states' attorneys general have filed a [brief](#) in support of a legal challenge to new visa rules limiting the amount of time an international student can be in the United States.

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill will [cancel](#) a student-exchange program with Fudan University, in China, after the U.S. Department of Defense warned that colleges that have ties with certain foreign universities and other institutions of concern could risk losing federal funding.

Ohio State University will pay a [\\$2.1-million fine](#) for allegedly failing to disclose academic ties to China on a federal grant application.

Programs that provide virtual exchange for staff members, offer short-term overseas placements for student teachers, and encourage cross-border research are among the latest recipients of the [Heiskell Award](#), which recognizes innovation in international education.

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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