

Losing International Students Could Devastate Many Colleges

Students could bypass the United States for friendlier countries as the Trump administration attacks universities and revokes visas. Their loss could hurt schools and the economy.



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By Stephanie Saul and Troy Closson

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Xiaofeng Wan, a former admissions officer at Amherst College, now works as a private consultant to international students who want to come to the United States. This week, as he held meetings in China with prospective students, he sensed a deep uncertainty among their parents.

“They really don’t know whether they should send their children to a country where they don’t welcome Chinese students or they see China as a hostile competitor,” Dr. Wan said by telephone from Beijing. “It’s an unprecedented situation that we’ve never seen before.”

For years, American colleges and universities have attracted growing numbers of international students who often pay full tuition, effectively subsidizing domestic students.

But the Trump administration’s recent move to deport hundreds of students here on visas, and his trade war with China, have stoked fears that the United States is no longer a welcoming place for international students. This week, the

administration also asked Harvard to hand over lists of foreign students, adding to a sense of panic on campuses.

Suzanne Ortega, president of the Council of Graduate Schools, said the chaos of visa terminations had fueled concerns among many students. “I think it sends a powerful signal to friends and family at home that the U.S. is not a safe place to be anymore,” she said.

If the nation gains a reputation for being hostile to international students, it could be devastating for many American colleges and universities.

There were more than 1.1 million international students in the United States during the 2023-24 academic year, according to a recent report released by the Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and the Institute of International Education. The number includes students who remain in the country briefly after graduation to gain work experience.

The report identifies New York University, Northeastern University and Columbia University as the three largest host schools for international students. At N.Y.U., their enrollment has increased nearly 250 percent over the last decade.

Losing foreign students could also be bad for the broader economy, experts say. International students pumped nearly \$44 billion into the American economy and generated 378,000 jobs last year alone, according to NAFSA: Association of International Educators, which promotes international education.

Moody’s, the bond rating agency, downgraded the higher education outlook to “negative” last month, citing federal policy changes as a threat.

The Trump administration has said that it is targeting international students who have broken the law or pose a threat to its foreign policy interests.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio has argued that “no one has a right to a visa.” In remarks last month, he said that in giving and revoking visas, “we’re going to err on the side of caution.”

“We are not going to be importing activists into the United States,” he added. “They’re here to study. They’re here to go to class. They’re not here to lead activist movements that are disruptive and undermine the — our universities. I think it’s lunacy to continue to allow that.”

International student enrollment had been on an upward trajectory for decades. Gaurav Khanna, an economist at the University of California, San Diego, who has studied foreign students, said the revenue they bring in helped some public universities weather the Great Recession.

Dr. Khanna’s research found schools that could attract students from abroad were often able to avoid raising in-state tuition for domestic students and major research and instructional cuts.

“To keep doors open for local students, you need to let in more international students,” he said.

Beyond the economic effects, leaders in higher education worry that decreases in international enrollment will deter the world’s top minds from coming to the United States. International students accounted for nearly 6 percent of the total higher education population in the United States, according to the I.I.E. report.

At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where more than one in four students hail from abroad, the president, Sally Kornbluth, said on Monday that the university would be “gravely diminished without the students and scholars who join us from other nations.”

“The threat of unexpected visa revocations will make it less likely that top talent from around the world will come to the U.S.,” Dr. Kornbluth said in a message to campus. “That will damage American competitiveness and scientific leadership for years to come.”

Chris R. Glass, a professor at Boston College who studies international enrollment, estimates that 50,000 to 75,000 international graduate students in science and technology fields could be affected by federal grant cuts.

Overall, he said the number of international students could fall below 1 million for the first time since the 2014-15 academic year.

An analysis by The New York Times found that the Trump administration has canceled more than 1,500 visas at 222 schools nationwide. Immigration agents have also sought to detain and deport a number of students and researchers.

Some of the visa revocations appear to be related to legal infractions in students' pasts, a few are related to activism, and in some cases students do not know why they have lost their visas.

One international student from London, Patrick, who is 22, described a huge amount of fear among his fellow students. He asked that neither his last name nor his university in New York be identified for fear of repercussions.

He said that he had recently deleted all of his text messages because he was worried about surveillance when he re-entered the country. Still, he said, he plans to finish his senior year in the United States and stay for a year after graduation.

President Trump's first term also brought a chill to international student enrollment. In 2017, Mr. Trump banned travel from seven predominantly Muslim countries, and many colleges reported dips in foreign applicants. A larger decline occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic.

"Certain universities probably can weather the storm. But other universities don't have the resources," Dr. Khanna said. "If they get cut off from a lot of their funding and at the same time get cut off from revenue from international students, they're in trouble."

Many of the students arriving from outside the United States view their degrees as paths to employment in the country.

But as the Trump administration seeks to crack down on immigration, some students could be deterred over the anxiety that studying in the U.S. and joining the domestic labor force no longer "guarantees you the things you thought it did," Mr. Khanna said.

It was already a particularly perilous time for American schools, who are facing a decline in students as birthrates dip.

Recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics predicts that the annual number of graduating high school seniors, which peaked this year at more than 3.8 million, will decline to 3.5 million by 2032.

During President Trump's first term, some American universities tried to persuade foreign students to come in spite of concerns about a hostile administration.

Now universities are scrambling to help the international students already enrolled who have been forced to leave.

After the State Department canceled the visas of 40 students and recent graduates of Northeastern University in Boston, the school said that it would offer some of those students remote learning opportunities or transfers to its international campuses.

Dr. Khanna said it wasn't clear what might happen long term, this time. "There's a question of 'will the U.S. lose this comparative advantage?'"

Kaja Andric, Halina Bennet and Steven Rich contributed reporting.

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