

Policy Actions Aimed at International Students and Scholars

Despite the benefits [international students and scholars](#) confer to American higher education, the workforce, and the scientific enterprise, the current administration has proposed and implemented sweeping policy changes seeking to deter them from studying at American universities, gaining work experience with American companies, and entering the workforce.

These actions, combined with [hostile rhetoric](#) and a decline in interest among international students in pursuing their studies at America's college and universities. For the 2025-26 academic year, [federal data](#) shows a 17% decrease in new international student enrollment and a 12% decrease in graduate student enrollment. This AAU resource summarizes how key executive, regulatory, and legislative actions are the United States' economy, society, and institutions of higher education. Please click on a section to learn more. It will be updated at regular intervals to reflect current policy conditions.

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Enhanced scrutiny of student visa applicants and holders

Rationale

- On January 20, 2025, President Trump issued [Executive Order 14161](#), "Protecting the United States from Foreign Terrorists and Other National Security and Public Safety Threats," which states that the United States "must be vigilant during the visa-issuance process" to ensure that foreign nationals, including international students and scholars, "approved for admission into the United States do not intend to harm Americans or our national interest."
- The order also directs federal agencies to ensure that foreign nationals seeking admission to the United States "are vetted and screened to the maximum degree possible."
- It calls on agencies to protect the American people against foreign nationals "who preach or call for sectarian violence, the overthrow or replacement of the culture on which our constitutional Republic stands, or who provide aid, advocacy, or support for foreign terrorists."

Social media vetting

- In May, the U.S. State Department [paused all interviews](#) at overseas consulates for international students and scholars applying for an F, M, or J visa under the U.S. Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) pending the development of a social media screening policy.
- On June 18, the State Department announced a [new policy](#) requiring all F, M, and J nonimmigrant visa applicants to adjust privacy settings on their social media accounts to "public" to facilitate a "comprehensive and thorough vetting."
- The announcement noted that "a U.S. visa is a privilege, not a right" and that "every visa adjudication is a national security decision."
- After this announcement, the State Department [resumed interviews](#) for F, M, and J visa applicants under the new policy.

“Catch and Revoke”

- In March, [media reports](#) indicated that the State Department launched a new program, [Catch and Revoke](#), that used artificial intelligence to review the social media accounts of tens of thousands of student visa holders for evidence of “alleged terrorist sympathies expressed after Hamas’ October 7 attack on Israel.”
- In an April State Department newsletter, Secretary Marco Rubio [confirmed](#) the existence of Catch and Revoke, a one-strike policy against international students whose visas would be “instantly revoked” if they have broken the law or “abuse[d] our hospitality.”
- On October 16, three unions [filed a lawsuit](#) against the Departments of State and Homeland Security, as well as U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) challenging the policy for [violating](#) the First Amendment rights of its members and the Administrative Procedure Act.

SEVIS record termination and visa revocation

- Beginning in April, thousands of international students and recent graduates had their records in the Student Exchange and Visitor Information System (SEVIS) [terminated](#) based on minor infractions or participation in protest activities.
- At least [100 lawsuits](#) were filed in federal courts across the country to have the records restored. In response to a data request made by the Senate and House Committees on the Judiciary, DHS confirmed it had, as of April 10, 2025, terminated more than 4,736 SEVIS records.
- Federal judges ruled the record termination as unconstitutional and [issued](#) dozens of restraining orders. The administration [restored](#) thousands of [SEVIS records](#); however, litigation brought by [higher education advocates](#) relating to the policy for SEVIS status termination and visa revocation remains ongoing.
- In August, the State Department announced that it had revoked [6,000 student visas](#) since the beginning of the year for overstays or alleged violations of the law. In October, the department [announced](#) it had rescinded visas from individuals who had celebrated activist Charlie Kirk’s death, but it is unclear if those individuals held student visas.
- In January 2026, the State Department announced it had revoked [8,000 student visas](#) as part of a larger immigration crackdown in which it terminated 100,000 visas.

Visa interview policy changes

- In September, the State Department [announced](#) that on October 1, students applying for nonimmigrant visas were no longer eligible for a visa interview waiver and required to appear for an in-person interview at a U.S. embassy or consulate.
- In addition, the department [announced](#) on October 10 that nonimmigrant visa applicants must schedule visa interviews at a U.S. embassy or consulate in their country of residence, rather than a third country location.
- These changes are leading to longer wait times for visa processing.

Universities to monitor and report “anti-Semitic harassment and violence”

- On January 29, President Trump issued [Executive Order 14188](#), “Additional Measures to Combat Antisemitism,” directing federal agencies to identify “all civil and criminal authorities or actions” that might be used to curb or combat anti-Semitism and to provide an inventory of all complaints and court cases against universities alleging “civil rights violations related to or arising from post-October 7, 2023, anti-Semitism.”
- The order also directed agencies to “familiarize institutions of higher of education with the grounds for inadmissibility” so institutions can monitor and report “alien students and staff” who engage in “unlawful anti-Semitic harassment and violence.”
- A subsequent White House [fact sheet](#) outlined the intention of the federal government to “deport Hamas sympathizers and revoke student visas” of those who “joined in the pro-jihadist protests.” The EO does not provide guidance on how colleges and universities are expected to fulfill these

monitoring and reporting requirements or how the administration will measure their compliance, according to [Arnold & Porter](#) and the [Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration](#).

Travel ban

- On June 4, President Trump declared [a full or partial ban on travel to the United States](#) for foreign nationals from 19 countries. Nationals from a dozen countries – Afghanistan, Burma, Chad, Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Haiti, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen – faced a full ban, regardless of visa type.
- Nationals from seven additional countries – Burundi, Cuba, Laos, Sierra Leone, Togo, Turkmenistan, and Venezuela – seeking immigrant visas and certain nonimmigrant visas, including students and exchange visitors, were also barred from entry (Proclamation 10949).
- On December 16, the administration expanded its [travel ban](#) to an additional 20 countries and the Palestinian Authority. Nationals from five countries and those traveling with Palestinian Authority-issued passports were added to the fully banned list. In addition, nationals from Laos and Sierra Leone were moved from the partially to fully banned list.
- An additional 15 countries were added to the partial ban list, applicable to immigrants and certain nonimmigrants, including students and exchange visitors.
- Finally, Turkmenistan was moved from the fully to partially banned list with students and exchange visitors now permitted entry (Proclamation 10988).
- The expanded travel ban covers nationals from 39 countries and individuals with Palestinian Authority travel documents. The administration justified the expansion to include countries that “continue to exhibit woeful inadequacies in screening, vetting, and provision of information” about residents seeking to travel or immigrate to the United States. The administration also claims that nationals from these countries have high overstay rates.

Pause on adjudicating petitions and benefit applications

- On December 2, DHS issued a policy [memo](#) directing USCIS to pause adjudicating petitions and benefit applications from nonimmigrant and immigrant visa holders who list “high risk countries” as their country of birth or citizenship. The memo identified “high risk countries” as the original 19 included in the June 4 travel ban.
- On December 5, USCIS announced the opening of the [USCIS Vetting Center](#), established to conduct “enhanced vetting” of immigration applications and petitions, prioritizing those from “presidentially designated countries of concern.”
- On January 1, 2026, the [policy was expanded](#) to cover petitions and applications from immigrant and nonimmigrant visa holders born in or with citizenship from 20 additional countries (as well as those with Palestinian Authority-issued passports) listed in December 16 travel ban. The new policy lists 10 exceptions to the pause in adjudications.
- It remains unclear how long the pause will last.

University-specific actions

Harvard University

- On May 22, the administration [revoked](#) Harvard University’s SEVP certification, attempting to end its ability to enroll international students.
- On June 4, President Trump issued a [proclamation](#) that suspended the entry of international students and exchange visitors seeking to enter the United States to attend or participate in a course of study or exchange program at Harvard University.
- After Harvard challenged both policies in federal court, U.S. District Court Judge Alison Burroughs issued two preliminary injunctions [blocking](#) the administration’s efforts to revoke Harvard’s SEVIS certification and to implement, institute, maintain, or give effect to the [proclamation](#).

- The government [appealed this decision](#) at the 1st U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. On January 20, AAU joined a group of higher education organizations in filing an *amicus* brief in support of Harvard’s suit against the administration.

Ending duration of status and reducing academic mobility

- In August, DHS [proposed a rule](#) that would impose a fixed time limit for international students to complete undergraduate, graduate, and professional degrees at U.S.-based colleges and universities.
- The rule would effectively end “duration of status,” a policy of allowing students and scholars on F or J visas to remain in the country for a flexible period of time so long as they are adhering to their visa requirements and making progress toward the completion of their degree.
- The rule would require students and scholars on temporary visas to file an extension of stay with immigration authorities if they haven’t completed their degree by their program’s end date or four years, whichever is the shorter time period.
- In addition, the proposed rule would place restrictions on students’ ability to transfer between programs and universities at the undergraduate and graduate degree levels.
- In September, AAU submitted [comments](#) requesting DHS to withdraw the rule, arguing that the rule “would create confusion for both international students and universities” while also hampering the nation’s ability to attract and retain international talent.
- In addition, AAU co-signed [comments led by the American Council on Education \(ACE\)](#) and as a member of the [Compete Coalition](#).

New H-1B visa program restrictions

\$100,000 fee

- On September 19, President Trump issued [Proclamation 10973](#), “Restriction on Entry of Certain Nonimmigrant Workers,” requiring American companies to pay a \$100,000 fee for every new H-1B petition filed after September 21, 2025.
- On October 20, USCIS issued guidance on the proclamation, stating, among other exceptions, that change of status, extension, and amended H-1B petitions are not covered under the proclamation and, therefore, not subject to the fee. This includes change of status petitions for student visa holders.
- A [recent analysis](#) found that U.S. colleges and universities, including several AAU member institutions, employ more than 16,000 H-1B visa holders. In addition, the ability to enter the U.S. workforce, often through an H-1B visa, is a key factor for many international students when deciding whether to pursue their education and complete their degrees in the United States.

AAU litigation

- On October 24, AAU [joined a lawsuit](#) filed by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia seeking to have the proclamation declared unlawful and to halt its implementation. Global Nurse Force, a nursing staffing agency, and other plaintiffs filed suit against the proclamation in the Northern District of California while state attorneys general from 20 Democratic-led states filed suit against it in the District of Massachusetts.
- On December 23, Judge Beryl Howell issued a decision in favor of the government, finding the proclamation lawful under the broad and ample authority given to the president by Congress under the Immigration and Nationality Act to restrict entry of immigrants and nonimmigrants. On December 29, AAU and the Chamber of Commerce filed an appeal with the 1st U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.
- Information and resources on this litigation can be [found here](#).

Weighted Selection Process for H-1B Lottery

- On December 29, DHS [finalized a rule](#) that would give petitions for H-1B visas at higher wage levels a higher probability of selection in the annual H-1B lottery. The rule, initially proposed on September 29, favors allocating H-1B visas to higher-wage and higher-skilled workers.
- Under the rule, recent graduates and early-career professionals with specialized skills will have a diminished chance of obtaining an H-1B visa, as they typically apply for positions at lower wage levels in their respective fields.
- Universities and nonprofit research organizations are still exempt from the H-1B visa cap. However, recent graduates of research universities and early-career professionals that seek private sector employment or training opportunities under the H-1B program will be affected.

Social Media Vetting of H-1B Applicants and Dependents

- On December 3, the State Department [announced](#) that it would expand its social media vetting policy pertaining to international students and exchange visitors to all H-1B applicants and their dependents, effective December 15. The expanded policy requires H-1B applicants and their dependents to set privacy settings in their social media profiles to “public.”

Crackdown on H-1B employers

- On September 15, the Department of Labor [announced Project Firewall](#), an enforcement action against employers who hire workers on H-1B visas. The enforcement seeks to verify employer compliance with H-1B program rules and ensure that “no employers are abusing H-1B visas at the expense of our workforce.” “no employers are abusing H-1B visas at the expense of our workforce.”

Heightened scrutiny of Optional Practical Training

- In May, USCIS Director Joseph Edlow [expressed interest](#) in ending the [Optional Practical Training \(OPT\) program](#) during his confirmation hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee. The program and STEM OPT extension provide an opportunity for international students on F-1 visas to gain practical work experience, often after graduation for up to 36 months (12 months for OPT and 24 months for STEM OPT extension).
- A proposed rule concerning [Optional Practical Training](#) is currently included in the Spring 2025 unified agenda and is expected to be issued in early 2026. The substance of the proposed rule is not yet known.
- In September, Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-IA) sent to a [letter](#) to DHS Secretary Kristi Noem urging the agency to stop issuing work authorizations to international students, citing “competition from foreign students” in rising unemployment among college-educated Americans.

Legislative proposals of concern in the 119th Congress

- [H-1B and L-1 Visa Reform Act](#), reintroduced in September by Sens. Chuck Grassley (R-IA) and Dick Durbin (D-IL), would impose new requirements on employers seeking to hire workers on H-1B and L-1 visas and prioritized applicants with higher levels of education.
- [American Tech Workforce Act](#), introduced by Sen. Jim Banks (R-IN), would raise the wage floor for H-1B workers, end the OPT program, and replace the H-1B lottery with a system that awards visas to the highest bidder.
- [Visa Cap Enforcement Act](#), introduced by Sen. Tom Cotton (R-AR) would end H-1B visa cap exemption for colleges and universities; the exemption allows colleges and universities to file an H-1B petition outside of the annual lottery.
- [OPT Fair Act](#), introduced by Sen. Cotton, would require OPT participants to pay social security and Medicare payroll taxes. Students on F-1 visas are currently exempt from paying the taxes because they cannot access social security or Medicare benefits.
- [H.R. 6937](#), introduced by former Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA), proposes to “eliminate” the H-1B program entirely.