

Scientific Talent in America: Going Abroad or Choosing Not to Come

The Trump administration's deep cuts to federal funding of scientific research, crackdown on universities, and proposals aimed at deterring international talent have unleashed a loss of scientific talent - a brain drain - from the United States to other countries.

U.S.-based scientists seek an exit strategy

The reaction of U.S.-based scientists, both native- and foreign-born, to the administration's research funding cuts and policy changes has been swift.

- In March, **more than 75% said they were considering leaving the United States**, according to a Nature newsroom poll of roughly 1,600 researchers.
- This sentiment was acute among **early career researchers**: 80% of postdocs and 75% of graduate students said they were considering going elsewhere.
- A May survey by the National Postdoctoral Association found that **federal research funding has been cut** for more than half of 378 respondents.
- A Nature analysis of jobs board data found that **U.S.-based scientists submitted 32% more applications to positions abroad** between January and March compared to the same period in 2024.
- Applications to U.S. jobs from European and Chinese scientists have **plummeted**.
- Even star researchers are weighing their options, including Fields Medalist and UCLA mathematician **Terence Tao** and Nobel Laureate **Ardem Patapoutian**, who was actively recruited by China after his NIH grant was frozen.

KEY POLICY ACTIONS

The administration has inflicted significant damage on the research enterprise and risked America's global leadership in science, technology, and innovation by:

- Terminating billions in research grants at universities.
- Moving to cap indirect costs at 15%.
- Canceling fellowships and other programs for early-career scientists.
- Laying off scientific and administrative staff at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Science Foundation (NSF), and other federal agencies.
- Enacting policies that undermine merit review and academic freedom.

In addition, the administration has taken steps to actively deter international students and scholars by:

- Delaying student visa interviews and denying or revoking student visas based on minor infractions.
- Enacting a full or partial travel ban on nationals from 39 countries and individuals with Palestinian Authority travel documents.
- Monitoring social media accounts for anti-American speech.
- Proposing a fixed period of study for student visa holders.
- Considering restrictions on Optional Practical Training (OPT) for student visa holders.
- Limiting access to H-1B visas through new fees and regulations that would penalize early career scientists.

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Early career foreign scientists are bypassing the United States

In response to the administration's cuts to university-based research, graduate and professional programs have significantly scaled back and have been forced to pause admissions, admit fewer students, and even rescind offers.

- A September survey found that prospective international students say they are **less likely to enroll** in a U.S.-based university because of administration proposals.
- Federal data show a **17% decline in new international student enrollment** on college and university campuses in fall 2025 compared to last year.

Peer nations are recruiting U.S.-based scientists

Other nations are capitalizing on America's brain drain and stepping up efforts to recruit highly mobile scientific talent through new investments in research, special visa and immigration programs, and cash incentives.

- **Canada:** Nature's analysis shows a 41% increase in U.S. applications to job postings in Canada. Canadian universities and provincial governments are actively recruiting both university-based researchers and laid off government scientists and health professionals. The Canadian government's new budget includes **\$1.2 billion for measures to lure foreign scientists and graduate students** and entice Canadian researchers back home. Canada will also launch an "accelerated immigration pathway" for H-1B visa holders.
- **Europe:** In May, the European Commission announced a **\$565 million investment to make Europe a "magnet for researchers"** over the next two years. In addition to funding, European leaders promised researchers academic freedom to promote "fundamental, free, and open research." In France, Aix-Marseille University's Safe Place for Science initiative received 300 applications from the United States although it only has funding to support 15 researchers. Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands, and other countries have made direct pitches to U.S.-based scientists to relocate.
- **China:** In October, China launched a "**K visa**" specifically for international science and technology graduates to relocate to China for study or work. Provincial governments are heavily recruiting skilled workers and research talent through large salaries, cash bonuses, housing, health care, and other benefits. China is also making massive investments in biomedical research to attract university scientists whose grants have been terminated or NIH scientists who have been fired. Universities are also aggressively wooing overseas talent, including researchers born and raised in China.
- **India:** The largest source of H-1B visa holders, India launched the **Visiting Advanced Joint Research Faculty (VAJRA) program** in 2017 to attract Indian-origin scientists back to the country's universities and research institutions. The government has pledged start-up packages for scientists to establish labs and hire research staff while also providing general relocation and integration support to families.

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