



The New Reality for International Students in America

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With the changes brought by the current administration in the United States and the rising challenges that follow, studying in the U.S. as an international student has become more difficult than before. New policies have added a considerable amount of uncertainty due to increased bureaucratic processes, rising tuition, restricted work opportunities after college, and the uncertainty surrounding long-term residency in the U.S. for international students. This blog examines the recent changes affecting international students and considers whether the benefits of studying in the U.S. outweigh the newly posed challenges.

Changes Brought by the Current Administration:

Federal Conditions Shaping University Policies: In August 2025, the new administration asked nine major universities to comply with a set of rules aligned with President Trump's agenda in exchange for federal funding. This places universities in a difficult position, balancing student satisfaction, which drives institutional success, against the funding that keeps these institutions operational. The details of the rules, reported by *The Wall Street Journal* are as follows:

- Universities must ensure admissions and financial support disregard race and sex when admitting students and hiring staff and faculty.
- They must publicly share anonymized admissions data, including GPA and test scores, broken down by race, national origin, and sex.
- All applicants must take a standardized test, such as the SAT, before being admitted.
- International students must not exceed 15% of undergraduate enrollment.
- Universities must ensure a “vibrant marketplace of ideas on campus” with no dominant political ideology.
- Departments that “punish, belittle, or spark violence against conservative ideas” must be abolished.
- Tuition fees must be frozen for five years, administrative costs reduced, and graduate earnings publicly reported by program.

- Institutions with endowments exceeding \$2 million per undergraduate student should waive tuition for students in “hard science” programs.

The American Federation of Teachers, the second largest teachers’ union, has criticized: “These rules stink of favoritism and patronage.” Professors at the targeted universities have also expressed concern, saying policies like this foment political violence and encourage students to be radicalized through extremism.

Travel Ban to 12 Countries: Effective June 2025, this order restricts nationals from Afghanistan, Myanmar, Chad, Congo-Brazzaville, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Haiti, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen from entering the U.S. Seven additional countries, Burundi, Cuba, Laos, Sierra Leone, Togo, Turkmenistan, and Venezuela, face partial restrictions. With limited exceptions, the order affects millions, including international students seeking to study or already studying in the United States. The administration frames this as protecting Americans from dangerous foreign actors.

New Visa Rules for International Students: A new rule proposed in August 2025 by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) would replace the “duration of status” regime for F-1, J-1, and M visa holders with fixed admission periods. Some of the key changes this rule would bring include:

- the visa validity end date aligning with at the program end date, or within four years, whichever comes first;
- reduction of F-1 visa grace period from 60 days to 30 days;
- restrictions on undergraduate students concerning ability to transfer between schools, changing majors, or changing educational levels during the first academic year.
- A restriction from changing programs for graduate students
- Failure to depart or apply for extension before the visa expires would be considered “unlawful presence,” with serious consequences.

The DHS claims this will provide better oversight and prevent overstays, but experts warn it increases bureaucratic hurdles and reduces flexibility for students pursuing doctoral or specialized programs, potentially harming U.S. universities’ competitiveness. Additionally, this comes at a time when international students are already facing heightened scrutiny. In April 2025, there was a wave of visa revocations, many of which were unjustified, that left many students uncertain about their status. New rules also require applicants to make their social media profiles public and disclose all handles on the visa applications they submit to the Department of State. While Secretary Marco Rubio has said this enhanced vetting will make the country safer, critics argue it could create a chilling effect among students and discourage them from applying.

H-1B Visa Fee Increase: Announced in September 2025, this rule imposes a \$100,000 fee on employers hiring foreign nationals under H-1B visas. While intended to encourage hiring American workers, critics argue it could push international professionals to seek employment elsewhere - and importantly, could discourage foreign students who often

rely on the H-1B visa for post-graduate employment from studying in the U.S. The reasoning behind this rule has been said to be a push for the American businesses to hire local talents, and utilize American professionals; however, studies have shown that H-1B workers have proven to complement and strengthen work opportunities for native-born Americans. Unsurprisingly, the policy is facing lawsuits, including from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Department of Education Restructuring: In March 2025, an executive order directed the closure of the U.S. Department of Education, instructing Secretary Linda McMahon to “return authority to state and local communities.” Although it did not pass, the order raised concerns about the continued support for international students.

Legal Battles with Top Universities: The administration has also targeted elite U.S. institutions, including Ivy League schools like Harvard. The DHS accused Harvard of allowing “anti-American pro-terrorist” individuals on its campus, and hence, announced that Harvard’s certification under the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) would be revoked, affecting 27% percent of Harvard’s student body immediately. Though the courts granted a temporary restraining order which blocked the restriction, this was a signal to other universities that major policy shifts can happen quickly and international students in the US may face more instability and risk amidst the administration’s ongoing legal conflicts with the educational institutions.

All of these policies, the fixed admission rules, travel bans, new visa restrictions, H-1B fee increases, Department of Education restructuring, and legal battles with top universities, contribute to growing uncertainty for international students. While the U.S. still offers high-quality education, students must weigh the benefits against the new challenges and risks posed by the current regulatory environment.

Suggested Reforms

While these recent policy changes may seem concerning for international students, the current administration can still take meaningful steps to address their concerns and recognize the longstanding contributions of international students to the U.S. economy and academic landscape.

Research shows that international students play a vital role in U.S. innovation and STEM advancement. More than 56% of international students in the U.S. are enrolled in STEM disciplines. Moreover, during the 2023–2024 academic year, international students contributed \$43.8 billion to the U.S. economy and supported over 378,000 jobs nationwide.

In addition, international students deeply value the opportunity to be educated in the U.S. The U.S. remains home to many of the world’s most prestigious institutions; in fact, according to the QS World University Rankings, U.S. universities make up half of the world’s top 10. A U.S. degree can also provide access to global alumni networks, diverse

cultural exposure, and higher employability rates compared to graduates from many other systems.

To ensure that the U.S. continues to attract the best and brightest minds, the relationship between international students and the U.S. should be framed as a mutually beneficial partnership, one where both students and the nation gain from the exchange of knowledge, innovation, and cultural understanding.

For this partnership to remain strong, several reforms should be considered:

- Streamline visa processes to reduce administrative barriers and provide clearer pathways for students to transition into the U.S. workforce post-graduation.
- Reinstate and protect Optional Practical Training (OPT) and related programs that allow international graduates to gain practical experience.
- Expand federal and institutional support services for international students, ensuring they have access to legal, academic, and career guidance.
- Encourage collaboration between universities and policymakers to ensure that immigration and education policies align with the U.S.'s long-term economic and research interests.
- Promote affordability by providing funding incentives for universities that maintain international enrollment diversity without excessive tuition hikes.

Final Thoughts

The United States has long been a beacon for knowledge, innovation, and opportunity. Whether it will remain that way depends on how it engages with global students who continue to believe in its promise. The question is no longer “why study in the U.S.?” but whether the system will make it possible to do so with hope and stability.

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