

Student visa restrictions are impacting more than universities

New rules may accelerate decline of much-needed international enrollment



While there is a legitimate role for immigration enforcement in ensuring that F-1 students comply with the rules, a well-functioning immigration system should also provide predictability for students and employers, write Irina Plumlee and Kristy Uyen Le. In this file photo, students walk to class at the University of Texas at Austin.

By Irina Plumlee and Kristy Uyen Le

This school year, international students returning to U.S. campuses are facing more than tuition and coursework. New restrictions on the F-1 student visa program are changing what it means to study in our nation at a time when international students already face growing uncertainty about their future. The impact, however, will reach far beyond students themselves. With international enrollment declining, the consequences could extend to universities, employers and the economy at large.

The current administration's new rules restrict students' ability to change majors or transfer schools, with even greater restrictions for graduate students, and generally prevent students from pursuing another program at the same or lower educational level. Additionally, the Department of Homeland Security is ending the longstanding "duration of status" policy, which allowed F-1 students to remain in the country for the period of their academic programs, provided they complied with program requirements.

Under the new rules, students will instead be admitted for the length of their academic program, up to a four-year maximum, and will need to seek an extension if they require additional time to complete their studies. While the change may appear administrative, its implications are broader: It replaces a longstanding measure of flexibility with a defined time limit, potentially adding uncertainty to an already complex process.

For decades, the "duration of status" framework recognized a practical reality: Education does not always fit into a certain timeline. Students may need additional time to complete a degree, change majors, transfer institutions or pursue further education. For prospective international students weighing where to study, the flexibility and predictability of a country's immigration system can become part of that decision, in turn influencing where the best and brightest choose to bring their talents.

The new F-1 restrictions also come amid an already significant decline in international bachelor's enrollment in U.S. universities, which fell on average by 20% in spring 2026 according to a Studyportals survey of participating institutions. When fewer international students choose to study in the U.S., the effects reach far beyond university enrollment. For the previous academic year, the National Association of Foreign Student Advisers projected that recent visa

restrictions and processing disruptions could contribute to a 15% decline in overall international enrollment, depriving local economies of approximately \$7 billion in spending and more than 60,000 jobs. Those projections, however, capture only the more immediate economic impact of declining enrollment.

The longer-term impact may be more significant. For many international students, an F-1 visa is the first step in their broader career and immigration planning. Upon earning a U.S. degree, many graduates rely on temporary employment authorization available to F-1 students after graduation, which allows them to work in this country for a limited period before they must secure another immigration status to remain employed. For many, that means competing for a limited number of H-1B visas through an annual lottery. Other options are considerably narrower: O-1 status is generally reserved for individuals who demonstrate an extraordinary ability, TN status is available for citizens of Mexico and Canada only, and other work visa options often do not apply to new graduates. When immigration policies make the U.S. less attractive to international students at the beginning of their careers, the country risks losing not only their economic contributions as students but also the skills and talent they could contribute to our workforce after graduation.

While there is a legitimate role for immigration enforcement in ensuring that F-1 students comply with the terms of their status, a well-functioning immigration system should also provide enough predictability for students to plan their education and for employers to plan their workforce. As international enrollment declines and other countries compete for the same talent, changes to the student visa system may affect not only international students and universities, but also the broader U.S. workforce and economy.

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