

The University of Chicago

Land of the Censored, Home of the Silenced: How Trump's Immigration Crackdowns
Undermine the Virtues of American Higher Education

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Abstract

President Donald Trump began his second term in January of 2025, and one of his main priorities was to crack down on immigration. In pursuit of this, he has taken multiple measures to increase deportation, the revocation of visas, and the detainment of noncitizens—regardless of status, criminal background, or legality. As a result, universities across the nation are experiencing unforeseen consequences regarding the free speech, safety, and security of their international students, as well as broader threats to their university culture. Using interviews and news monitoring, I explore how Trump’s immigration crackdowns impact higher education on a micro and macro scale, including individual emotions and behaviors, departmental changes, and the nature of resistance to his efforts. Focusing in on the University of Chicago, I explore how a university famously known for free expression is responding to these rapid changes, giving voice to international students and how they respond to this administration in real time. These findings shed light on the future of international talent in American higher education, and consequences of the Trump administration’s crackdowns, including brain drain, revenue decline, the loss of university culture, and broader threats to democracy at large.

Dedication

To every immigrant in the United States and their sacrifice. You make America great, and you deserve to call this place home the same as I do.

Land of the Censored, Home of the Silenced: How President Trump’s Immigration Crackdowns Undermine the Virtues of American Universities

Land of the free, home of the brave. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. A city on a hill. These are the phrases I have come to know the United States by. These phrases are the reason my parents came to the states and made a home for me here. These are the reasons millions come to this country and chase the grand old ‘American Dream.’ As I look at this nation under President Trump, I do not recognize my home. The United States, a country built on immigrants, now run by a President set on defining this group as a national threat. I do not recognize my university, a place that constantly boasts about free expression, now caught in an ideological battleground that could cost us our academic freedom. I feel a mix of confusion, disappointment, and rage, feelings I share with many immigrants in this country, who must now readjust to a version of America that has lined them up for political slaughter. This essay documents some of the immigration crackdowns by Trump and their consequences for universities, using anonymous interviews to give voice to international students who, like me, question what they believed America to be. This work begins with broad immigration changes, transitions to campus detentions and status changes, focuses momentarily on the University of Chicago, and finally, envisions the future.

Introduction

“I just felt severely disappointed,” a student from Hong Kong mentioned, reflecting on the 2024 election. “I think for a lot of international students... because we can't vote, we just feel kind of powerless.”¹ President Donald Trump’s second term began in 2025, and he has turned the United States on its head. Amidst a looming recession, a divided nation, and the mass defunding

¹ Interview with international student #1, April 16, 2025.

of vital government agencies and programs, Trump has launched several executive orders aiming to forcefully remove mass numbers of immigrants from the country. He released the Securing Our Borders Executive Order (EO) to block U.S. entry from the south by constructing a wall and instating the immediate removal of people entering without inspection, including those with immigration cases currently open.² He has increased Army and Marine troops at the U.S.-Mexico border, and he has limited humanitarian parole and Temporary Protected Status. He mandated that each ICE office must detain at minimum 75 noncitizens per day. He permitted the use of Guantanamo Bay—yes, *that* Guantanamo Bay—to detain up to 30,000 noncitizens. His posse in Congress also passed the Laken Riley Act, which means that immigrants cannot just be detained for terrorist acts and violent crime, but the equally dangerous act of shoplifting a candy bar or jumping a turnstile in the subway.³ He invoked the 1798 Alien Enemies Act, a presidential power to detain or deport non-citizens from nations the U.S. is at war with, to deport 5 Venezuelan nationals on legal status without due process. The only other instances the Alien Enemies Act was used have been World War I, World War II, and the War of 1812. Trump pulling this out on a random Tuesday is parallel to whipping out a Browning .50 caliber machine gun to kill a fly. He is denying federal funding for sanctuary cities and for many nonprofits aiding undocumented immigrants. Trump’s EO, entitled “Protecting the Meaning and Value of American Citizenship,” was designed to eliminate birthright citizenship. Imagine for a moment if a school principal decided to expel every enrolled student on the grounds that their parents had not attended the school before. This resembles what Trump attempted and failed to accomplish with his EO. But

² Donald J. Trump, *Executive Order 14165: Securing Our Borders*, January 20, 2025, The White House, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/securing-our-borders/>.

³ *Laken Riley Act*, Pub. L. No. 119-1, 139 Stat. 3 (2025), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/senate-bill/5/text.>; New York City Bar Association, *Report on the Trump Administration's 2025 Changes to Immigration Law*, updated March 18, 2025, https://www.nycbar.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/TrumpAdminChangesImmigrationLaw_Updated_3.18.2025.pdf.

he is even more audacious than you'd think. Not only would this policy seem unfair by most, but it is strictly in violation of the 14th Amendment of the Constitution. To be clear, Trump attempted to take down *the* Supreme Law of the Land with an Executive Order. You can imagine someone trying to erase stone engraving with those smiley face erasers we all had in second grade, and even that would be less absurd than trying to directly undermine the Constitution.

If it sounds as though Trump is changing a lot, that is because he is! Trump signed 141 executive orders before his first 100 days in office. He is like a kid having a tantrum and throwing his spaghetti at the wall because he wanted pizza for dinner instead. There is no aim or precision, he is simply seeing what sticks. *Wham.* Remain in Mexico. *Wham.* Revoke Birthright Citizenship. *Wham.* Laken Riley. `It is sticky, it is messy, and nonsensical—not all of it stays up, and it leaves a mess for others to clean. Failures aside, a lot of the spaghetti did stay up on the wall, and the 'Head of State hissy fit' is far from over. This essay will now narrow in on Trump's next target: U.S. higher education.

University Crackdowns

Trump officials recently attempted to remove close to 5,000 students from the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), risking their ability to remain in the U.S.⁴ Let's take a step back and understand what this means. SEVIS is a database under the U.S. Department of Homeland Security that tracks compliance with the enrollment of international students and exchange visitors, storing information such as program of study, duration of stay, employment authorization, and passport details, among other information. Schools in the states must apply for the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) certification, which allows them to enroll international students at their institution. Students, once admitted to a

⁴ Trump Administration Reinstates Lawful Status for Foreign Students," *FAIR*, April 28, 2025, <https://www.fairus.org/legislation/executive/trump-administration-reinstates-lawful-status>.

SEVP-certified university, are registered for SEVIS. They pay a fee, fill out an I-20 form, and apply then interview for a F-1 or M-1 visa, designed for academic and vocational studies, respectively. Once granted, this visa allows for entry into the U.S.⁵ In 2023, ICE reported 1,503,649 active SEVIS records for students. Most SEVIS records are of international students from India and China; these countries combined made up 47% of the total SEVIS records in 2023. The five states that host the most international students with SEVIS records are California, New York, Texas, Massachusetts, and Florida.⁶

There are many reasons you can be terminated within SEVIS, for example, expulsion, dropping out from your program, or having a criminal record.⁷ But having your records in SEVIS is vital to maintaining your legal status. If your SEVIS record is terminated, you lose your visa status, and will be ordered to depart from the U.S. if an immigration judge identifies unlawful presence. Think about it like this: If a visa were a purchased VIP ticket to Beyonce’s next concert, then having a SEVIS record is like the wristband they give you after security checks your bags. It confirms your compliance, permits you to travel freely to and from your seat, and you cannot attend the concert without it. When you arrive at a concert venue, you would have to bring a weapon, drugs, or something harmful to not be given clearance. Meanwhile, students nearly had their SEVIS records removed for minor offenses, for example, going 10 miles above the speed limit—a year ago. Another student almost lost his SEVIS record for a DUI charge from

⁵ U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "About SEVIS," *Study in the States*, accessed May 11, 2025, <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/site/about-sevis>.

⁶ U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. *2023 SEVIS by the Numbers Report*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, May 10, 2024. https://www.ice.gov/doclib/sevis/btn/24_0510_hsi_sevp-cy23-sevis-btn.pdf

⁷ U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "Terminate a Student," *SEVIS Help Hub*, last updated November 7, 2024, <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/sevis-help-hub/student-records/completions-and-terminations/terminate-a-student>.

2023 that was *dismissed*.⁸ What was initially a plan (entitled “Catch and Revoke”) intended to screen students' social media accounts for any support of Palestine quickly snowballed into a database review of any students with prior criminal activity dating back to the Biden administration.⁹ From there, the Department of State moved to remove the SEVIS records of any student who appeared in a criminal history search, now risking the ability to remain in the U.S. for virtually any student who has had any contact with the law, including speeding and DUIs, dismissed or not. In fact, most students whose SEVIS records were terminated had no connection to advocacy of Palestine at all.¹⁰

Were it not for the mountain of lawsuits that challenged these terminations, Trump would have ensured any international student could lose their SEVIS record for the slightest reason. The lawsuits first argued that the Trump Administration violated the fifth amendment right to due process, as the DHS “terminated... SEVIS record[s] based on improper grounds without prior notices and without providing [students] an opportunity to respond.”¹¹ The second offense was the administration’s violation of the Administrative Procedure Act (APA), a federal law passed in 1946 that regulates the power of federal agencies.¹² The DHS violated several components of the APA. In terminating SEVIS records without a rational explanation connecting

⁸ Surbhi Gloria Singh, "F-1 Visa Worry: Students Face Action over Past and Minor Offences," *Business Standard*, April 15, 2025, https://www.business-standard.com/immigration/f-1-visa-worry-students-face-action-over-past-and-minor-offences-125041500850_1.html.

⁹ Marc Caputo, "Scoop: State Dept. to Use AI to Revoke Visas of Foreign Students Who Appear 'Pro-Hamas'," *Axios*, March 6, 2025, <https://www.axios.com/2025/03/06/state-department-ai-revoke-foreign-student-visas-hamas>.

¹⁰ Liam Knox, "How Trump Is Wreaking Havoc on the Student Visa System," *Inside Higher Ed*, April 3, 2025, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/global/international-students-us/2025/04/03/how-trump-wreaking-havoc-student-visa-system>.

¹¹ *Doe et al. v. Bondi et al.*, No. [Case No. pending], Complaint for Declaratory and Injunctive Relief, U.S. District Court for the District of Utah, filed April 18, 2025, <https://www.acluutah.org/en/cases/doe-et-al-v-bondi-et-al>.

¹² *Administrative Procedure Act*, 5 U.S.C. §§ 551–559 (1946).

each individual's conduct to their termination, the DHS is found in violation of APA protections setting aside agency actions that are "arbitrary, capricious or an abuse of discretion"¹³ The DHS is also in violation for terminating the SEVIS statuses of those whose visas were revoked, as this agency does not have the authority to terminate SEVIS simply because of visa revocation.¹⁴ In other words, if someone takes your concert ticket without warning, you are not suddenly required to also turn in your security wristband unless another reason is given, as you are still complying with the rules of being at the venue. As a result of the violations to constitutional and federal law, the Trump administration was forced to reinstate thousands of SEVIS records as quickly as they removed them. "The [SEVIS restorations] started rolling in—I went to bed... and I had gotten about 30 emails," said an attorney Charles Kuck, representing a class-action lawsuit over SEVIS. "When I woke this morning, there were hundreds, so clearly ICE was working all night long."¹⁵ Importantly, the administration announced these reinstations are temporary, and they have active plans to issue policy granting the DHS legal authority to terminate SEVIS records in the same manner.¹⁶ Nothing has been officially implemented at this time, but this is one of many causes of chaos and panic for noncitizen students in the nation.

Trump is not just cracking down on F-1 visa students for criminal activity, but is attempting to criminalize the ideologies and opinions of many students, coming directly for university culture and activism in the process. Trump signed the Additional Measures to Combat Antisemitism EO, which encourages universities to monitor and report activities by "alien

¹³ *Administrative Procedure Act*, 5 U.S.C. § 706(2)(A) (1946).

¹⁴ *Administrative Procedure Act*, 5 U.S.C. § 706(2)(C) (1946).

¹⁵ Armando Garcia, Soo Rin Kim, and Deena Zaru, "Trump Administration Restores Status of International Students After Abrupt Terminations," *ABC News*, April 26, 2025, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-administration-restores-status-international-students-after-abrupt/story?id=121197087>.

¹⁶ Johanna Alonso, "International Student Lawsuits Result in Restored SEVIS Records," *Inside Higher Ed*, April 24, 2025, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/global/international-students-us/2025/04/24/international-student-lawsuits-result-restored>.

students and staff”¹⁷ that may be in violation of a section of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA)—the section pertaining to terrorism.¹⁸ Understand that the guise of preventing terrorism is mandated by legislative precedents, such as the Foreign Relations Authorization Act of 1987, which accomplishes two things. Firstly, it affirmed noncitizens’ rights to “any past, current, or expected beliefs, statements, or associations which would be protected under the Constitution if engaged by a U.S. citizen.” Secondly, it created the exception to these provisions for noncitizens “for other reasons, such as national security purposes, or criminal or terrorist activity.”¹⁹ Thus, to criminalize noncitizens for freely exercising constitutional rights, you must do so by establishing a threat to national security, or identifying criminal or terrorist activity. This informs the argument made in many high profile deportation cases, including one Rümeyşa Öztürk, a Ph.D. candidate and Fullbright Scholar at Tufts University, for co-writing an op-ed in disapproval of her university’s handling of the pro-Palestinian movement. ICE abducted Rümeyşa in the middle of campus, in plain clothes and without warning. Against Massachusetts court orders, ICE kidnapped her and took her to Louisiana.²⁰ Similarly, Badar Khan Suri, a postdoctoral scholar and professor at Georgetown was taken into custody by ICE agents when he was coming home from a Ramadan celebration.²¹ Like Rümeyşa, he was not charged with any crime, and was shipped off to Louisiana without any contact to family or a legal team. Badar’s wife is a

¹⁷ Donald J. Trump, *Executive Order 14188: Additional Measures to Combat Anti-Semitism*, January 29, 2025, The White House,

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/additional-measures-to-combat-anti-semitism/>.

¹⁸ *Immigration and Nationality Act*, § 212(a)(3), 8 U.S.C. § 1182(a)(3) (2023).

¹⁹ *Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1988 and 1989*, Pub. L. No. 100–204, 101 Stat. 1331 (1987), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/100th-congress/house-bill/1777>.

²⁰ American Civil Liberties Union, “Court Hears Arguments on the Unconstitutional ICE Detention of Rümeyşa Öztürk,” *ACLU*, April 3, 2025,

<https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/unconstitutional-ice-detention-rumeysa-ozturk>.

²¹ American Civil Liberties Union of Virginia, “ACLU of Virginia Files Emergency Motion to Stop Trump Administration’s Illegal Deportation of Georgetown Professor for Exercising Free Speech,” *ACLU of Virginia*, March 20, 2025,

<https://www.acluva.org/en/press-releases/aclu-virginia-files-emergency-motion-stop-trump-administrations-illegal-deportation>.

Palestinian U.S. citizen, and his father-in-law was a former political adviser to Hamas, but had left this role more than a decade prior.²² Both Rūmeysa and Professor Suri were identified as threats to national security.

“We haven’t seen anything like this as far as I’ve been a practicing attorney,” said Robyn Barnard, an immigration lawyer at Human Rights First. “It’s just really deeply concerning to see the U.S. government deciding to use their limited resources in terms of enforcement of immigration laws to target someone whose speech they just disagree with, but otherwise doesn’t seem to violate our First Amendment.”²³ And Trump is not drawing the line at visa holders. Mahmoud Khalil, a green card holder and recent graduate of Columbia University was arrested and detained, and the State Department is currently working to revoke his green card. While attending Columbia, Mahmoud was very politically active on campus, playing a main role in organizing and leading protests in support of Palestine. He is being arrested on the grounds that he is a threat to U.S. foreign policy, and was shipped off to Louisiana, where ICE will hold him while his deportation case is processed.²⁴ Mahmoud is a particularly painful case, as this detainment caused him to miss the birth of his first child.²⁵

As a green card holder, Mahmoud is a legal permanent resident, meaning his status in the United States should be far more secure. Visa holders can have their visas revoked with relatively low burden of proof, but green card holders are rarely deported, and are usually done

²² Jaclyn Diaz, "What We Know About the Case of Detained Georgetown Professor Badar Khan Suri," *NPR*, March 21, 2025,

<https://www.npr.org/2025/03/21/nx-s1-5336173/immigration-georgetown-university-professor>.

²³ Edward Wong, Charlie Savage, Hamed Aleaziz, and Luis Ferré-Sadurní, "Trump Administration Seeks to Expel a Green-Card Holder Over Student Protests," *The New York Times*, March 10, 2025,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/10/us/trump-rubio-khalil-columbia-student-protests.html>.

²⁴ *Ibid*

²⁵ Adrian Florido, "Mahmoud Khalil Misses Son's Birth After ICE Official Denies His Request to Be There," *NPR*, April 21, 2025,

<https://www.npr.org/2025/04/21/nx-s1-5371757/mahmoud-khalil-misses-sons-birth-after-ice-official-denies-his-request-to-be-there>.

so as a result of serious criminal convictions. “I think of Mahmoud Khalil a lot,” said a green card holder born and raised in Dubai, “and I am worried. I did not know I could be deported and now I wake up everyday in fear.”²⁶ Anxieties aside, whether or not Khalil will be deported still remains to be determined. An immigration judge in Louisiana ruled Khalil was deportable under the INA, but a federal court in New Jersey has since intervened to evaluate the constitutionality of this potential deportation, evaluating if the INA violates First Amendment free speech and Fifth Amendment due process in this context. Rumeysa Ozturk’s and Badar Khan Suri’s cases were similarly intercepted by federal courts,²⁷ asserting that immigration courts—particularly in states like Louisiana and Texas where the Trump administration has a better chance of winning due to the ideologies of the region—are not equipped to evaluate constitutional rights in deportation cases.²⁸ In fact, Khalil’s deportation ruling in Louisiana was said to have been pre-written, subjecting Khalil to a “charade of due process.”²⁹ Khalil’s case, the sudden detainment of Badar and Rumeysa, and the over 1800 other students who have lost their student visa³⁰ demonstrates a significant change in immigration enforcement, which has largely focused on crime, to a focus on ideological targeting, once again with little regard for constitutional basis. Who would have thought the president with 34 felony convictions would have no regard for the law?

²⁶ Interview with Student #3, April 24, 2025.

²⁷ Nik Popli, "Judge Orders Release of Rumeysa Öztürk, Tufts Student Detained by ICE," *Time*, May 9, 2025, <https://time.com/7284578/judge-orders-release-of-rumeysa-ozturk-tuft-student-detained-by-ice/>

²⁸ New York Civil Liberties Union, "What You Need to Know About Mahmoud Khalil's Legal Case," *NYCLU*, April 21, 2025,

<https://www.nyclu.org/commentary/what-you-need-to-know-about-mahmoud-khalils-legal-case>.

²⁹ American Civil Liberties Union, "Despite Lack of Evidence, Louisiana Immigration Judge Rules Against Mahmoud Khalil in Deportation Hearing," April 11, 2025, <https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/despite-lack-of-evidence-louisiana-immigration-judge-rules-against-mahmoud-khalil-in-deportation-hearing>.

³⁰ Ashley Mowreader, "International Students Visas Revoked," *Inside Higher Ed*, April 7, 2025, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/global/international-students-us/2025/04/07/where-students-have-had-their-visas-revoked>.

Let's quickly recap. So far, to prevent terrorism, the Trump administration has moved to remove a Ph.D. candidate and Fullbright Scholar for writing an op-ed in support of Palestine, a researcher at Georgetown University whose wife is Palestinian, and a lawful permanent resident who organized pro-Palestine protests on campus. The Oxford dictionary defines terrorism as "the unlawful use of violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political aims."³¹ What is not included in this definition? Writing an op-ed, having a wife, protesting on campus, or any of the other actions that this administration is stating warrant detainment and deportation under the INA. These cases, particularly the green card case of Mahmoud Khalil, have changed everything we know regarding noncitizen statuses. A student from Hong Kong studying in the U.S. shared with me, "I feel like a lot of parents of international students feel like they're exempt from these changes...so they're like, at least you have a green card now, so you probably won't be as affected. Or oh, you're Asian, so you won't really get as affected. But then actually, people are realizing that no one's really protected anymore."³²

So why is the exercise of freedom of speech and the right to protest cause for deportation, green card or not? You might have noticed that all of these instances involve some outspoken support, or even just association, with people in Palestine. Unfortunately, this phenomenon is not new. In 2013, Michael Ratner, a human rights attorney, coined the term "the Palestinian Exception," to describe the pattern in the United States where advocacy for the rights of Palestinians is criminalized in ways that other forms of advocacy are not. Ratner's 2015 report documented around 300 incidents in the years 2014 and 2015, where students and academics were disciplined, censored, and even threatened for their pro-Palestinian activism.³³ Now in

³¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "terrorism," accessed May 4, 2025, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/terrorism_n.

³² Interview with Student #1, April 16, 2025.

³³ Angela Campion, "Michael Ratner's Palestine Legacy," *Palestine Legal*, May 20, 2016, <https://palestinelegal.org/news/2016/5/20/u552f1fvkqe6kszq55deyr70a3wpfm>.

2025, while free speech and campus protest is permitted and typically encouraged, protest in support of Palestine is now a free ticket to a detention center in Louisiana for noncitizen students and faculty. Palestine is the one exception to constitutional rights.

This shift is even more serious when you revisit the history of legal battles over free speech at universities in this country. In the court case *Healy v. James (1972)*, James Healy and other students sought university recognition for their anti-war organization, to which the university president denied them on the grounds of radicalism and potential for disruption. While recognizing the tension between maintaining order and safeguarding free expression, the Supreme Court nonetheless ruled in favor of Healy, stating “it can hardly be argued that either students or teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate.”³⁴ The court felt that failure to recognize this organization, while not sufficient to stop them from sharing ideas, would prevent them from accessing university resources to grow and sustain their organization, and this violated their constitutional rights. In *Keyishian v. Board of Regents (1967)*, these freedoms were again affirmed. A New York state law required employees to sign a loyalty oath affirming they are not communists, and stated those affiliated with Communist Parties are to be fired. Coming out of the Red Scare in the 50s, communism was a very sensitive topic in 1967, not unlike Palestine today. Harry Keyishian at the State University of New York, argued that this NY law was unconstitutional, and the Supreme Court supported his position in a 5-4 split. In support of Keyishian, Justice Brennan wrote that “the classroom is peculiarly the marketplace of ideas,” and “though the governmental purpose be legitimate and substantial, that purpose cannot be pursued by means that broadly stifle fundamental personal liberties.”³⁵ Even when the courts find the motivation compelling, they still

³⁴ *Healy v. James*, 408 U.S. 169 (1972).

³⁵ *Keyishian v. Board of Regents*, 385 U.S. 589 (1967).

defer to allowing freedom of speech. Cases such as these reinforce the idea of the university as a haven for the free exchange of ideas, not to be intercepted by the state. In fact, the very first universities in the West were self-governed, and students and professors elected their own presidents.³⁶ While much has changed since then, universities have a long history of being safe-havens from surrounding political turmoil, sanctuaries for free thought and free expression, and spaces where curiosity is encouraged.

By arresting those who protest or speak out for what they believe in, Trump is destroying a core function of these universities in the first place. And worse, he is putting his money where his mouth is. He has frozen federal funding for several prestigious institutions, including Harvard University, Columbia University, University of Pennsylvania, Cornell University, and Northwestern University, and probably any other university that constantly sends you mail. These cuts have ranged all the way from \$175 million to \$2.2 billion dollars. The direct consequences of these cuts may not be clear, but federal funding is actually used primarily to support science research and student financial aid. You can imagine the damage Trump may cause by freezing these funds, and how many students may not be able to access grants or loans to finance their education, as well as the research and innovations lost as labs must shut down from a lack of funding. These are the costs of Trump's ideological mission to alter universities that have "become dominated by Marxist maniacs and lunatics,"³⁷ by destroying campus activism, dissolving DEI, and ending antisemitic propaganda. By antisemitic propaganda, he includes pro-Palestine rhetoric, which is not inherently antisemitic. Let's not forget that Donald

³⁶ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "University," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, last modified May 3, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/university>.

³⁷ Donald J. Trump, "Agenda47: Protecting Students from the Radical Left and Marxist Maniacs Infecting Educational Institutions," speech, July 17, 2023, <https://www.donaldjtrump.com/agenda47/agenda47-protecting-students-from-the-radical-left-and-marxist-maniacs-infecting-educational-institutions>.

Trump, the brand new face of combating antisemitism, is the same man who hosted white nationalist Nick Fuentes and rapper-gone-mad Kanye West for dinner at Mar-a-Lago, both of whom have explicitly and repeatedly expressed adoration for Nazis and neo-nazi movements. Yet, Trump is using anti-semitism as justification for taking your child's financial aid and halting cancer research. If you ask me, Trump is just using a good cause like combating antisemitism to achieve his true end goal: to ideologically control universities and restrict speech that he disagrees with. Some might even call it dictatorial.

Universities will continue to strategize in response to the current administration, and in the midst of this chaos, support their international students, comply with the federal government, and in some cases, fight back. Two prominent universities, Columbia and Harvard, have had unique battles, each choosing a path of compliance or resistance. When President Trump canceled \$400 million in funding to Columbia, they responded by conceding to the government demands. They have appointed a new senior administrator over their Middle Eastern department, the Center for Palestine Studies, and other departments pertaining to the Middle East. They hired peace officers with arrest powers to control, or rather stifle, protesting, and have banned face masks on campus, which tend to be worn by pro-Palestine protestors to avoid identification.³⁸ They even adopted a formal definition of antisemitism,³⁹ which is not publicized, but we can presume that it includes some rhetoric about Palestine, a topic previously protected on campus under free speech. In short, Trump told Columbia to "sit," "stay," and "roll over," and Columbia is a very obedient dog. Notably, Trump has yet to restore the funding in response.⁴⁰

³⁸ Columbia University, "Advancing Our Work to Combat Discrimination, Harassment, and Antisemitism at Columbia," March 21, 2025, [https://president.columbia.edu/content/advancing-our-work-combat-discrimination-harassment-and-antise mitism-columbia](https://president.columbia.edu/content/advancing-our-work-combat-discrimination-harassment-and-antise-mitism-columbia).

³⁹ Matthew Haag, "Columbia Agrees to Trump's Demands After Federal Funds Are Stripped," *The New York Times*, March 21, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/21/nyregion/columbia-response-trump-demands.html>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

“Shaking under government pressure, Columbia crumbled,” said Tyler Coward, the lead counsel for government affairs at the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE). “If Columbia — with its immense resources and influence — can’t stand up to government demands that threaten free speech, what are other colleges to do?”⁴¹ Coward is asking the million dollar question. Universities may, one by one, decide to just fall in line out of fear. At the end of the day, the potential loss of millions to billions of dollars in federal funding is not damage that every institution can just shake off.

Harvard University, on the other hand, is all bark...and *all* bite. Trump demanded multiple changes from Harvard, such as to screen international students hostile to “American values,” allow an external party to review the Middle Eastern Department, and report faculty who discriminate against Jewish/Israeli students. He requested they end support and recognition of the Harvard Palestine Solidarity Committee, Harvard Graduate Students 4 Palestine, Law Students 4 Palestine, and Students for Justice in Palestine, as well discipline Harvard students who engaged in the encampment protests—just to name a few of his requests.⁴² Harvard President Alan Garber wrote a letter back with a big fat *NO* to Trump’s demands, stating “the university will not surrender its independence or relinquish its constitutional rights.”⁴³ Garber also asserted that the Trump administration had not provided any evidence for their funding slashes, and strongly objected to the consequences of a funding freeze of their hospitals and medical research. Garber also agreed to address antisemitism on his own terms, and listed extensive reforms Harvard has already made in the past 2 years to foster a supportive learning environment for all

⁴¹ Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE), "Columbia caves to feds — and sets a dangerous precedent," March 21, 2025, <https://www.thefire.org/news/columbia-caves-feds-and-sets-dangerous-precedent>.

⁴² Josh Gruenbaum, Sean R. Keveney, and Thomas E. Wheeler, "Letter to Dr. Alan M. Garber: Agreement on Reforms at Harvard University," April 11, 2025.

⁴³ William A. Burck and Robert K. Hur, "Letter from Harvard University’s Legal Representatives in Response to April 11, 2025, Letter from U.S. Federal Agencies," April 14, 2025.

students.⁴⁴ The Trump administration replied by freezing \$2.3 Billion in federal funding, at which point Harvard bit back by filing a lawsuit against the President, stating the funding freeze is a violation of First Amendment Rights.⁴⁵ Compared to Columbia, we see a completely different response, one that actively resists Trump's attempts at an unconstitutional and authoritarian takeover. While we do not yet know the court ruling on the lawsuit, Harvard has a strong case, and this decision will likely impact how other universities—assuming they have the resources—decide to comply or resist.

The University of Chicago

Focusing in on the University of Chicago in particular will highlight some of the politics regarding toeing the line and staying neutral. University of Chicago prides itself on promoting free expression as a core value. In 2015, the university's Committee on Freedom of Expression drafted a set of guiding principles to demonstrate commitment to freedom of speech, known as the Chicago Principles. Since then, more than 70 institutions have voted on adoption of the Chicago Principles, and they have been commended by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE).⁴⁶ The university opens orientation for each new class of students with an address dedicated solely to freedom of speech. The commitment to free speech is cited in many administrator responses, including, infamously, the allowance of white supremacist discourse from students on campus.⁴⁷ You might expect a resistance to Trump's ideological takeover similar to Harvard University's from the "free speech haven" University of Chicago, especially as international students make up 24% of our university community.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Stephanie Saul, "Harvard Sues Trump Administration Over Threats to Cut Funding," *The New York Times*, April 21, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/21/us/harvard-lawsuit-trump-administration.html>.

⁴⁶ University of Chicago, "History of Free Expression," accessed May 4, 2025, <https://freeexpression.uchicago.edu/history/>

⁴⁷ Paul Alivasatos, email message to the University of Chicago Community, September 23, 2024.

⁴⁸ University of Chicago, "International Students," *College Admissions*, <https://collegeadmissions.uchicago.edu/campus-life/international-students>.

The University of Chicago campus has made a slew of changes as a result of Trump's university actions, including at the Office of International Affairs (OIA), Student Wellness, and the recognized student-run organizations on campus—we call them RSOs for short. All of these groups have banded together to provide support and information. The OIA has announced they are actively monitoring SEVIS so they can notify students whose records are being removed. The OIA website now includes information on avoiding scams from people impersonating the federal government and inquiring about personal information. They have created support spaces where students can come with their anxieties and worries, draw, do a puzzle, and experience community. Several 'Know Your Rights' talks have been hosted, both by faculty at the OIA and by RSOs for Palestinians and other marginalized communities. These discuss what to say if you encounter an ICE officer, who to contact for legal advice if a loved one is detained, and where you can—and cannot—engage in protest. They told us to memorize sentences such as “I do not consent to a search,” “Am I free to go?,” and “I am invoking my right to remain silent.” Over 100 students are in attendance, and there are always too many worries to fit in the 1.5 hours of allotted meeting time.

Student Wellness, the University of Chicago office dedicated to health, mental health, and wellness services for students, have also undergone some changes, though less programmatic. “The biggest change is fear,” said one of the Student Wellness psychologists. “Rümeysa Öztürk lives in our minds every day.”⁴⁹ Many other psychologists echoed the fear sentiment, mentioning this is something they have never seen before, that it's disruptive. Unpredictable. Hectic. Another psychologist mentioned that typically, before big programmatic changes such as the ones Trump is making, university heads are given notice, and they have meetings and prepare. Now, they

⁴⁹ Focus Group with Student Wellness Psychologists, April 18, 2025.

simply “wake up, with no heads up.”⁵⁰ Students are worried about traveling for their summer jobs, their vacations, to see their families. Parents are contacting the university asking for their children to be sent home. Everyone is feeling out of control, student and faculty alike. The Student Wellness psychologists are looking out for each other more than ever before, making sure their coworkers take walks, do not read every piece of news, and take care of themselves. Trump has put new strains on their jobs like never before.

While *campus* is unrecognizable and faculty is grappling with new changes every day, university *administration* seems to be doing more of the same. President Paul Alivastos in an incredibly lengthy email just last April wrote that “freedom of expression and academic freedom is the order of the day...we must work to uphold them...we commit earnestly to fulfill our obligations.” Many other key buzzwords were mentioned in this email, namely, “There is reform to be had,” and “freedom from discrimination” is an obligation he intends to honor.⁵¹ What was not mentioned? How exactly the university will accomplish this. In fact, when 592 universities across the nation signed a statement explicitly opposing the Trump administration’s “undue government intrusion in the lives of those who learn, live, and work on our campuses,” the University of Chicago’s president did not sign.⁵² Even to merely state opposition to infringement on free expression was too much for our free speech president.

This inaction did not go unnoticed by students on campus. The current student body president promptly released a statement and launched a petition to urge administrators to “engage fully and visibly with this national crisis... to protect the very foundations of higher learning...

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Paul Alivastos, email message to University of Chicago community, April, 25, 2025.

⁵² Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), "A Call for Constructive Engagement," April 22, 2025, <https://www.aacu.org/newsroom/a-call-for-constructive-engagement>.

[because] our silence speaks.”⁵³ He is not the only student disappointed in the university’s response. An international student from the United Arab Emirates similarly commented, “this is the free speech university. UChicago has a responsibility... and I want to see consistency. The university has to pick a stance, because this is a moment of stance-taking.”⁵⁴

All support offered aside, international students on campus must still manage their behavior to avoid a sudden detainment. “You could post up on Instagram if you wanted, say whatever the hell you wanted, but just avoid going to protest” was the advice previously given to a student from Chile, “But now it’s like, even worse,” he says, “because, not even you need to get arrested, you need to have said something, and then your visa will get revoked.”⁵⁵ From another student born in Hong Kong, “a lot of people who are getting their visas revoked right now, it’s on the basis of they’re speeding or they have a previous history of very small crime... so I try to support in other ways, like donating, but in terms of actual protests, I try to avoid that.”⁵⁶ Students are also faced with the pressure of not just what they do, but what they say. “I’ll tell you something I’m really nervous about,” a student from the UAE told me, “my thesis is about Palestine. Now I’m taking precautions to make sure that my thesis is not displaying any sort of political stance, like where I had previously written Jordan, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, I changed it to the Arab Levant. I’m changing names to... sort of present this version of the thesis that is politically neutral... just to give myself a sense of safety.”⁵⁷ A student from Hong Kong said to me, “some teacher asked me if she could use my paper [concerning China] as an example in her class at UMich, which is where she’s teaching right now. And I said, ‘oh, maybe don’t put my

⁵³ @uchicago_usg, “Stand Up or Stay Silent? Why the University of Chicago Must Defend Academic Freedom Now!,” Instagram Post, April 22nd, 2025.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DlxhOiztQTT/?igsh=MXZjd2dyMWlvOHI2Yw==>

⁵⁴ Interview with Student #3, April 24, 2025.

⁵⁵ Interview with Student #2, April 17, 2025.

⁵⁶ Interview with Student #1, April 16, 2025.

⁵⁷ Interview with Student #3, April 24, 2025.

name.” They continued, “I feel the pressure to not publicize my political views, for example...I was more pro Palestine.”⁵⁸ Even noncitizen professors are removing texts indirectly concerning Palestine from their syllabi out of fear of being reported. Unfortunately, the Palestine Exception still persists even at the free speech university. These students not just watch what they post, but the words they submit in academic coursework. They force their brilliant young minds into a dim state of political neutrality. How many students are hiding their true opinions in class discussions? How much campus organizing for valued causes is lost from fear of being criminalized without reason? What will universities become if students are afraid to voice anything other than utter neutrality?

Looking to the Future

As Trump singles out noncitizen students, many of them are rethinking what originally drew them to the United States. “Especially, like, maybe during Obama's presidency, [we] really saw the US as the American dream, you know, where you can build your life and...I think the US does, objectively have more opportunities in a wider variety of areas.”⁵⁹ Immigrants have a far more interesting relationship to the U.S. than you and me. They *choose* to come here, away from home. They have an idea of America, the land of opportunity, before they see the real thing. In many ways, they are more patriotic than us, and they love this country enough to leave their family behind and become someone else. But this idea is such a dramatic shift from the reality they now face. “I don't know what could happen tomorrow,” a student from UAE tells me, “he [referring to Khalil] is this high profile person in all these events, and is still being treated this way, and it's worrying... it's scary.”⁶⁰ Another student said, “I don't know if I see a long term life

⁵⁸ Interview with Student #1, April 16, 2025.

⁵⁹ Interview with Student #1, April 16, 2025.

⁶⁰ Interview with Student #3, April 24, 2025.

here... I don't know how welcome I would feel here in general,” and “that's really different to my perspective from before.... I kind of want to leave now.”⁶¹

As students grapple with these new anxieties about what is next for them, what happens to U.S. education? To start, the U.S. appears to be in the beginning stages of brain drain, a phenomenon where a nation’s highly trained and talented move elsewhere. “I've been opening myself to other opportunities, maybe in Europe,” said a student from Chile.⁶² And while part of the brain drain is a result of uncertainty and feeling unwelcome, another component is purely logistical. Scholars and researchers, American-born or not, are finding themselves out of jobs as their research departments are closing due to funding cuts. Without U.S. higher education leading research and innovation, brilliant minds will head to Europe to get access to these opportunities. Ekaterina Zaharieva, the European Commissioner for Startups, Research, and Innovation told EU lawmakers, “Europe can and should be the best place to do science, a place that attracts and retains researchers, both international and European,” and she has made efforts to substantially increase the financial support offered by the European Research Council.⁶³ Other European universities are welcoming American émigrés with grants, welcome centers, and recruiting dedicated specifically to their situation.⁶⁴ As Trump makes noncitizens feel more unwelcome and makes research opportunities more scarce, our domestic and international scholars will naturally seek places outside the U.S. to work on their passions.

As international talent leaves, this creates an imbalance for domestic students as well.

International students are typically not granted any financial aid, as they cannot receive U.S. Pell

⁶¹ Interview with Student #1, April 16, 2025.

⁶² Interview with Student #2, April 17, 2025.

⁶³Aitor Hernández-Morales, Giedrė Peseckytė, and Pieter Haeck, "Europe to burned American scientists: We'll take you in," *Politico*, April 4, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-exploit-donald-trump-brain-drain-academic-research-progressive-institutions/>.

⁶⁴Ibid.

Grants or federal student loans. Additionally, if you are sending your kid to study in the U.S. from China or India, you are typically wealthy enough to afford those additional costs, and as such, are outside the income range that universities identify for need-based aid. What ends up occurring as a result of these barriers is that only the wealthy and upper class international students attend universities in the United States. The full tuition payments from these students bolster the university budget to offer more financial aid to low-income domestic students. Economists estimate that from 1996-2012, a 10% reduction in domestic funding caused an 16% increase in foreign enrollment at public research universities to offset the funding losses.⁶⁵ If this Brain Drain reaches significant amounts, it will raise questions about the ability of universities to finance their services, including research and domestic financial aid. In short, Trump’s plan for “America First” may produce the opposite results. In more crude terms from a student I spoke with, “you’re actually f*cking up your country... a lot of the reason why the US is the best in the world here, is also partially because there’s so much international talent coming in.”⁶⁶

Finally, there will be a loss to cultural diversity on campus. Immigrants bring with them money, talent, but also, diverse ways of thought. “Americans are...not revolutionary,” commented a student from Chile. Referencing the student-led encampments in support of Palestine, they said, “that was some lame a** protesting...back home...that is the first day of protest. The next day, you take over the school, and you barricade the entire place. I think sometimes [Americans] are not able to criticize their own state because they’re blinded by their own fanaticism... whereas in Chile, we know our state is sh*t, so we always criticize it.”⁶⁷ A student of Indian descent mentioned similarly, “in India...if there’s injustice...the

⁶⁵John Bound, Breno Braga, Gaurav Khanna, and Sarah Turner, "A Passage to America: University Funding and International Students," *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 12, no. 1 (February 2020): 97–126, <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/pol.20170620>.

⁶⁶ Interview with Student #1, April 16, 2025.

⁶⁷ Interview with Student #2, April 17, 2025.

community...will organize and... will speak up, even if it means losing what you have... people try, and that's what matters. I think, in the US, people don't have the wherewithal to speak up unless things get really bad, and I don't even think then everyone will speak up.”⁶⁸ Immigrants too capture the heart of free expression. They do not just bring ideas from their home cultures, diversifying the opinions of other students around them, but they bring fresh ideas on America, and they bring with them a fight. If Trump succeeds, there will be many financial and prestige consequences, but also, it seems, there will be cultural ones. This blatant attack on free speech has already caused so many international students to self-censor. Remember that the United States was built by and for immigrants seeking freedom. What will become of this country if it continues to punish immigrants for this same cause?

The fight is far from over, but if the current administration is successful, everything that higher education prides itself on—innovation, academic freedom, free speech, diverse perspectives—may start to disappear. Think back to high school, where everyone learns a standardized education. Your teachers give you a lecture and you take notes, as you and your classmates sit at a desk facing forward. In college, however, you sit in a circle, facing each other, and you and your peers discuss your reactions to the text, asking thought-provoking questions. High schools are not places of innovation and research, nor protest, because children need to learn the basics. College, for many, is the first opportunity to truly think for yourself, away from your hometown and family. You have a range of classes you can choose from and diverse options for your field of study. You conduct your own research projects. You think freely. Trump’s ideological mission to destroy universities is more than a xenophobic overstep of executive power. Left unchecked, he could force universities into submission, only reinforcing the wishes

⁶⁸ Interview with Student #3, April 24. 2025.

of the state. He could expand his ideological attacks to any group of people *or* any ideology, leaving all of higher education vulnerable. He could erase precisely what makes universities so unique. In a nation where we all receive the same education and free speech is criminalized, the need to suppress resistance dissolves entirely. As this fight continues, more lawsuits emerge, and more actions threaten our universities, we must prevent this dictatorial agenda from taking root, and we must anchor ourselves to the pillars that make the United States great, both on and off campus grounds: our democracy, our diversity, and our freedom—of thought and expression. Only then can we, once again, call ourselves Land of the Free.