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The Trump Administration's International
Student Ban on Harvard: Implications for
Academic Freedom, Institutional Autonomy,
and U.S. Higher Education

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Abstract

In 2025, the Trump administration targeted Harvard University with accusations which mainly included: antisemitism and ideological bias, leading to a high-stakes conflict over academic freedom. Starting in January, executive orders aimed to curb DEI programs and campus antisemitism, followed by a March review of Harvard's \$8.7 billion in grants. In April, a \$2.2 billion funding freeze and \$60 million contract termination followed Harvard's rejection of governance demands. On May 22, the administration revoked Harvard's SEVP certification, threatening 6,800 international students, prompting lawsuits on April 21 and May 23 alleging First Amendment violations. A May 23 restraining order blocked the ban, but on May 27, \$100 million in contracts were targeted for termination. These actions disrupted Harvard's research, strained finances, and endangered its global reputation, while galvanizing public support and highlighting tensions between federal control and university autonomy.

Definitions of Keywords

Trump Administration: The executive branch of the US government which is led by President Donald Trump, who took office in January 2025 for his second term.

Harvard University: A private Ivy League university in Cambridge, Massachusetts, known for its academic greatness and the essential amount of international student population.

Lawsuit: A legal action filed in court to resolve a dispute between parties, seeking remedies like injunctions or damages.

Federal Funding: The financial support that is provided by the US government to institutions for research, education, or other programs, often through grants or contracts.

Anti-semitism: Prejudice, discrimination, or hostility directed against Jewish people.

International Students: Non-american citizens enrolled at a university on student visas, often contributing diverse perspectives and significant tuition revenue.

SEVP Revocation: The withdrawal of university's certification under the Student and Exchange Visitor Program, required to enroll international students of F-1 or J-1 visas.

Temporary Restraining Order (TRO): A court-issued order to temporarily halt an action until a hearing can determine further legal steps, often to prevent immediate harm.

First Amendment: The U.S Constitution's provision guaranteeing freedoms of speech, religion, press, assembly, and petition.

DEI Programs: Diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives aimed at promoting representation, fairness, and inclusion in institutions.

Tax-Exempt Status: A designation under U.S tax law exempting non profit institutions like universities from federal income taxes.

Truth Social: A social media platform founded by Donald Trump, used for direct communication with supporters.

Funding Freeze: A suspension of allocated federal funds, preventing their disbursement to recipients.

Department of Homeland Security (DHS): A U.S. federal agency which is responsible for immigration enforcement, border security, and programs like SEVP.

Alan Garber: The president of Harvard University in the year 2025, responsible for leading the institution's response to external challenges.

Judge Allison Burroughs: A U.S. District judge in Boston, appointed by the former president Obama, overseeing federal cases.

Federal Contracts: Agreements between federal agencies and institutions for services or research, often tied to specific deliverables.

Task Force: A temporary group formed to address a specific issue, often involving multiple agencies.

The Timeline of Events

Starting from the year 2025, many actions were taken towards this issue not only affecting the university but the students and the governance in a short time period. Some of the key actions are listed down below ending on May 27.

January, 2025:

Trump took office in January 2025, following a campaign where he vowed to crack down on pro-Palestine protests, diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programmes, and “woke

ideology” on college campuses. Trump also signed a series of executive orders calling for government agencies to take actions against DEI programmes at private institutions, including universities, and to increase government actions to combat anti-Semitism, particularly on campuses.

February, 2025:

The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) launched a multi-agency task force in order to root out anti-Semitic harassment in schools and on college campuses. In addition to the Department of Justice, the Task Force included representatives from the U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and other agencies as it developed in time. The Task Force was planned to be coordinated through the Department’s Civil Rights Division.

March, 2025

On March 7, The Trump administration took its first action against a U.S. university which was Columbia. With this event, the administration slashed \$400m in federal funding to Columbia University and accused the school of “continued inaction in the face of the persistent harassment of Jewish students”.

On March 21, Columbia yielded to Trump’s demands which included banning face masks, empowering campus police with arresting authority, and installing a new administrator to oversee the department of Middle East, South Asian and African Studies and the Center for Palestine Studies.

Finally on March 31, The US Departments of Education (ED), Health and Human Services (HHS), and the US General Services administration (GSA) announced an official review of \$255.6 million in Harvard contracts and \$8.7 billion in multi-year grants.

April, 2025:

The main actions started on April 11 started the whole crisis of international students studying at Harvard. Harvard was sent a letter saying that Harvard had failed to live up to both the intellectual and civil rights conditions in the recent years that justify federal investment.

The letter lists several demands sent by the Trump administration like but not limited to:

- Requiring Harvard to commission an external audit of some programs and departments such as, “Divinity School”, and “Harvard Law School International Human Rights” by August 2025,
- Implementing a campus-wide mask ban with suspensions for violations that have occurred during the 2023-2025 academic years,
- Disclosing the foreign sources responsible for funding and cooperating with a federal forensic audit,
- Submitting certified process each quarter of a year until minimum 2028 to demonstrate the compliance of the reforms and adherence to federal civil rights laws.

On April 14, the president of Harvard Garber issued a forceful rejection of the demands and wrote “The University will now surrender its independence or relinquish its constitutional rights”. After this, the U.S. administration announced an immediate freeze on funding which included \$2.2bn in multi-year grants and \$60m in multiple year contracts.

On April 15, Trump accused Harvard of implementing on social media: “Perhaps Harvard should lose its Tax Exempt Status and be Taxed as a Political Entity if it keeps pushing political, ideological, and terrorist inspired/supporting ‘Sickness?’ Remember, Tax Exempt Status is totally contingent on acting in the PUBLIC!”

One day later on 16th of April, The Department of Homeland Security called on Harvard to turn over records on any foreign students’ “illegal and violent activities”, while threatening to revoke the university’s Student and Exchange Visitor Program approval. The certification is required for it to enroll foreign students. While giving a deadline to April 30, 2025. While Trump posted on Truth Social saying: “Harvard has been hiring almost all woke, Radical Left, idiots and ‘birdbrains’ who are only capable of teaching FAILURE to students and so-called ‘future leaders’.”

On April 21, Harvard filed a lawsuit against the Trump administration, accusing it of violating the First Amendment of the US Constitution with “arbitrary and capricious” funding cuts. This lawsuit was a reaction to the letter that was sent by the Trump administration on April 11, challenging the administration’s freeze of \$2.2 billion in federal research funding.

May, 2025:

On May 2, Trump stated that the administration would take away all tax-exempt status of Harvard. Posting on social media saying “We are going to be taking away Harvard’s Tax Exempt Status. It’s what they deserve!” However, no immediate action was taken.

On May 5, The Trump administration claimed to be cutting all new federal grants to Harvard.

On May 13, The US Task force announced another \$450m in federal funding to Combat Anti-Semitism from eight federal agencies.

On May 19, The DOJ announced it will be using the False Claims Act, typically used to punish federal funding recipients accused of corruption, to crack down on universities such as Harvard over DEI policies. The Department of Health and Human Services also said it was terminating \$60m in federal grants to Harvard.

On May 22, The Trump administration, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), revoked Harvard's Student and Exchange Program (SEVP) certification and banned the university from enrolling international students. This action was for the international students studying in the 2025-26 academic year. Harvard responded as: "We are fully committed to maintaining Harvard's ability to host our international students and scholars, who hail from more than 140 countries and enrich the university – and this nation – immeasurably."

On May 23, Harvard University filed another lawsuit against the Trump administration challenging the SEVP revocation as unlawful and retaliatory. On the same day, U.S. District Judge Allison Burroughs issued a temporary restraining order (TRO) which blocked the administration from enforcing the ban and protecting Harvard's ability to enroll international students.

Finally on May 27, The Trump administration sent a draft letter to many federal agencies. Some include: Departments of Health, Human services, and so much more. It instructed them to terminate all of the remaining federal contracts with Harvard, according to an approximate amount of \$100 million. This directive also required agencies to find other vendors for contracts in the future. The aim is to "completely sever" the government's business relationship with Harvard.

Its Effects on Life

As might have guessed, this ban comes with many consequences. The main areas that are affected by this action are: economy, U.S, students who study at Harvard, the U.S population, and the other universities. Leading to much bigger problems in the future.

On Harvard University:

It's Economy:

International students, which form the 28% of Harvard's student body in the 2024-2025 academic year, can be used as a critical revenue. With the university's tuition

being approximately \$59,320 in 2024-25 academic year and for 2025-26, rising to approximately \$87,000 the students contribute to the environment by \$400-600 million annually. The ban implemented by the Trump administration threatening to eliminate this revenue, decreases Harvard's operating budget. Also by using graduate programs where international students make up to 40-50% of enrollment. Including Harvard's \$52 billion endowment, this major loss, combined with a \$2.2 billion federal funding freeze and \$100 million in contract terminations, could force budget cuts, research, and financial aid for students that are in need.

Impact on Research and Teaching:

Many international students who have studied at Harvard have been contributing to the research as well as inventions and innovations in many areas. Some are: medicine, technology, and public policy. With this recent ban, the research amount that is made by the students will start decreasing in the near future, and worsen after time.

Reputational Damage:

Harvard is one of the best universities globally which comes with a global reputation. Many have stated that Harvard is no longer Harvard without its international students. Furthermore, the letter that the Trump administration sent to Harvard on April 11, included many accusations of "fostering violence, antisemitism, and coordinating with the Chinese Communist Party." which also threatened Harvard's image amongst other universities.

On the United States and the Population:

Long-Term Economic Competitiveness:

International students are very likely to come up with new inventions and innovations. Research shows that a 1% increase in international students leads to 15% more patents per capita. It is also shown that immigrant-founded businesses are more successful and common in the US. According to these results, it is possible to see that this ban risked driving talent to competitors. Some of them are China, Canada, and the UK. This brain drain could eventually lead to worsen scenarios where the U.S. leadership weakens in technology and science. Costing billions in future economic output.

Cultural Diversity:

As we all know, the U.S. is formed by different ethnicities and immigrants. Also, international students from more than 140 countries enhance the cultural diversity first on the campus and then the country. If they are no longer in the US, many state that it would diminish the diversity of cities like Cambridge and weaken the community vibrancy in many of the states and cities. Michelle V. and Wayne M. which were the respondents to this issue, have stated that this would eventually lead to a loss of cultural exchange, and harm America's reputation as a "welcoming nation".

Socioeconomic Disadvantage:

Because of the reduction in Harvard's tuition revenue, the ban in the future could limit need-based financial aid, affecting low and middle-income American students. With this action, the opportunities for social equity. Resulting with a bigger difference between different economic classes.

International Students:

This ban brought a "mass panic" with itself among Harvard's international student population. As known, Harvard is mainly formed by its international students which forms 27% of the whole. These students faced visa revocations or were required to transfer to other universities in order to maintain legal status. Some faced major threats to their careers, due to the visa revocations disrupting research and teaching roles, potentially affecting one of the largest threats of vast deportation on a unionized workforce in American history. Most of the students even canceled travel plans or sought legal advice which disrupted academic focus or caused major distress.

On Other Universities:

Immediate Impacts:

This ban was described as a threat implementing "warning to all universities" by DHS Secretary Kristi Noem, which signalled potential similar actions against other schools located in the United States. For example, Columbia University faced a similar experience where Trump's demands after a \$400 million funding cut. Columbia implemented a mask ban, and enriched the campus with police officers and trucks, overseeing any complications in the future. This shows that other universities might be affected by this ban in the future. Other universities which relied on international students as well are very likely to face potential financial crisis due to the decline in domestic high school graduates.

Long-Term Implications:

Academic Autonomy at Risk:

The protests that have started concerning the administration's demands for Harvard to audit faculty ideologies saying that as the richest school in America, Harvard could be coerced while smaller institutions like community colleges could be "crushed without batting an eyelid."

Global Competition:

The ban accelerated a shift to other countries like Canada, the UK, and China where the talent and education of international students are appreciated. These governments invest in higher education, increasing the success rate of students. For example, 3 of the students which applied to Yale recently moved to Canada to continue their education. This could

eventually weaken the amount of highly educated people in the U.S. , reducing its influence in global criteria.

Conclusion

This article talks about the effects of the ban that Harvard University is currently facing implemented by the Trump administration while also stating the timeline of events. This ban doesn't only affect the students that are currently studying at Harvard but the whole U.S. population, the economy of America, and the other universities that are located in America as well. In this short time period, many actions were taken from both sides and serious accomplishments were made. The United States itself is formed by immigrants which come from many different countries. So this ban submitted by the president of America will result in America losing its reputation as a "Welcoming Nation".

Resources

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