

The Dangerous Rise in Foreign Workers in American Universities

By Jay P. Greene

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Introduction

This report provides evidence of the link between growing foreign employment in higher education and a higher number of protests following the Hamas invasion of Israel on October 7, 2023. Those protests promoted a variety of radical agendas, including socialist and Islamist arguments against America, Israel, and Jews.

Colleges and universities do not face the same barriers to hiring foreign labor as for-profit companies do. For example, for-profit companies like Google or Amazon can only hire foreign employees by winning a lottery for H-1B visas, which are limited to 85,000 per year. Universities face no limit to how many H-1B workers they can hire. This unfettered access to hiring non-citizens has made universities an attractive vehicle for foreigners seeking end-runs around immigration laws so they can enter and stay in the U.S. The dramatic increase in foreigners working in higher education, particularly among selective universities, has also fundamentally changed the priorities of those institutions. They have increasingly adopted global perspectives that are indifferent or even hostile to American interests.

In 2024–25, undergraduate and graduate students [received \\$275.1 billion](#) in federal aid “from all grants, federal loans, tax credits, and federal work-study” programs. Given that universities are the beneficiaries of these and other forms of direct and indirect subsidies from U.S. taxpayers, the disconnect of values and priorities between higher education and the American public is unsustainable. Realigning the interests of universities and the taxpayers and voters who subsidize them will require reining in the growth of foreign labor hired by universities.

To be sure, foreigners can contribute valuable energy and skill to U.S. universities, but this report will show that, at higher concentrations, they can also steer universities away from American interests. Avoiding excessive concentrations of foreign workers in higher education involves imposing caps on the number of those who can be hired, like the caps for-profit companies already face. Those caps strike a balance between harnessing foreign talent to help American organizations and upholding American interests. Corporate America has managed to thrive with caps on hiring foreign labor, and American universities could do the same.

The Foreign Labor Pipeline in Higher Education

Universities enroll foreign students, [nearly 60 percent of whom are graduate students](#). Many of these foreign graduate students are really employees, because they work in labs or teach classes in exchange for free tuition and a modest living stipend. Foreign undergraduates should be understood as prospective workers, as there are no barriers to their becoming graduate students or applying for employment at the university after completing their undergraduate education.

Between 2008 and 2024, the total number of people in the U.S. with F-1 student visas increased by 75 percent, [from 671,616 to 1,177,766](#). Almost the entirety of this increase is explained by foreign graduate student enrollment, [which rose by 83 percent compared to 13 percent for foreign undergraduates](#). As a percentage of total enrollment, foreign students comprised only 2 percent of undergraduates nationwide in both 2008 and 2024. But the share of foreign graduate students surged from 13 percent to 21 percent of total graduate enrollments during that same period. [And at elite universities like the](#)

[Ivy League](#), foreign students make up more than a third of total enrollment and nearly half of graduate enrollment.

The number of F-1 visa holders, especially at elite universities, is inflated by the Optional Practical Training (OPT) program, which allows foreign students who graduate and are recommended by their university to remain in the U.S. for up to three years working in their field of study—often at the university where they studied. Foreign students can also enter the higher education workforce after graduation or after completion of the OPT program by being sponsored for an H-1B visa by a college or university. Unlike in the

private sector, where [the number of H-1B visas granted each year is capped at 85,000](#), there is no limit on the number of H-1B visas universities can sponsor. Additionally, the \$100,000 fee that President Trump announced for new H-1B visas (recently [vacated](#) by a federal district court) [does not apply to F-1 visa holders seeking to change their status to an H-1B visa](#).

Tracking H-1B Use in Higher Education over Time

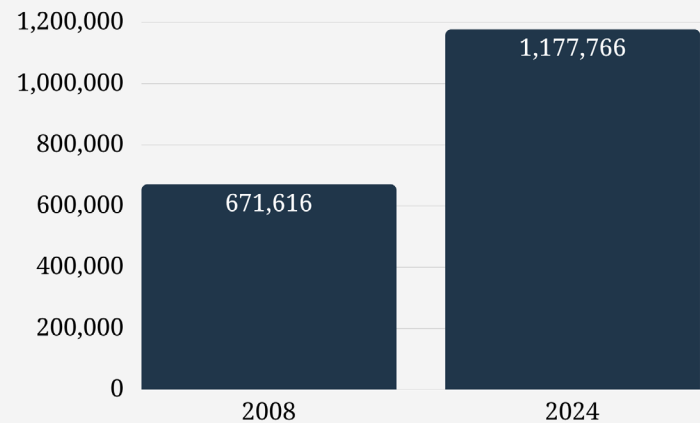
It is possible to identify trends in how many H-1B visas are sponsored by universities or colleges with data from [the H-1B Employer Data Hub maintained by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services](#). The Data Hub breaks out information for the “Educational Services” industry for each year from 2010 to 2025. That information includes the number of “New Employment Approval” H-1B visas sponsored by every organization with the words “college” or “university” in its title.

In 2010, the number of newly approved H-1B visas sponsored by colleges or universities was 11,868. That number remained relatively stable through 2021, never rising above 12,432 (in 2011) or falling below 10,506 (in 2017). But in 2022, the number of newly granted H-1B visas sponsored in higher education jumped to 14,261, rising further to 16,608 in 2024 before retreating a bit to 15,763 in 2025. The number of H-1B visas sponsored by colleges and universities averaged 15,810 from 2022 to 2025 compared to an average of 11,305 from 2010 to 2021, an increase of 40 percent.

It is unclear why the number of H-1B visas sponsored by higher education had been stable for over a decade and then dramatically increased starting in 2022. There is no cap on how many of these H-1B visas universities could sponsor, so any change would have to be a function of the supply of foreign labor, especially coming from F-1 visa holders, seeking more permanent employment, as well as the willingness of universities to hire those foreign workers.

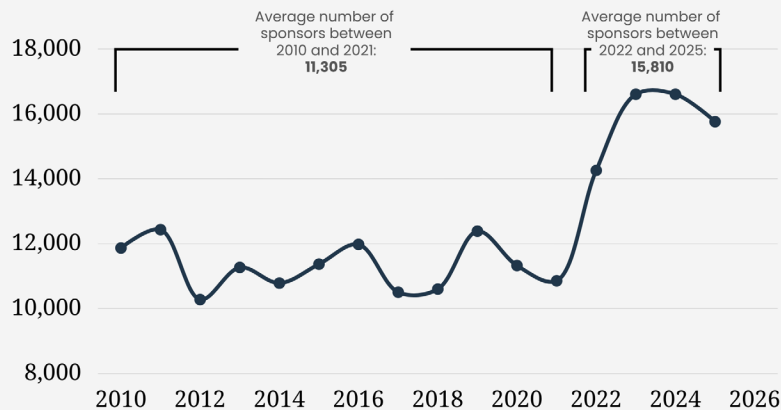
Notably, the enrollment of foreign students in graduate schools and the number of [participants in OPT programs](#) also rose in the years leading up to 2022. The number of foreign students in the OPT program hit 223,539 in 2019, more than triple the 66,601 participants in 2008. As we have already noted, foreign graduate enrollment jumped by 83 percent between 2008 and 2024. With a flood of

75% increase in total number of people in the U.S. with F-1 student visas from 2008 to 2024



Institute of International Education. (2025). "International Student Enrollment Trends, 1948/49 - 2024/25." [Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange](https://www.opendata.org). Retrieved from <https://www.opendata.org>.

Number of newly approved H-1B visas sponsored by colleges or universities over the years



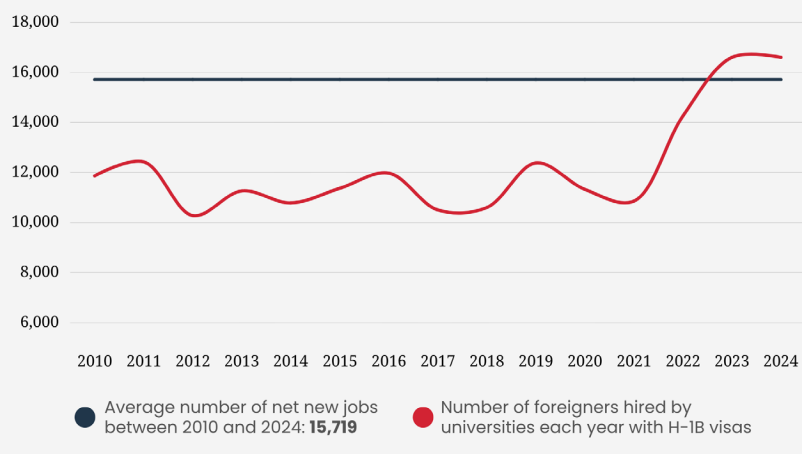
Graph only records sponsors with “college” or “university” in their titles.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. (2026). “H-1B Employer Data Hub.” *H-1B Employer Datahub*. Retrieved from <https://www.uscis.gov/tools/reports-and-studies/h-1b-employer-data-hub>.

F-1 visa holders looking for work and a cap of 85,000 H-1Bs available for the private sector, these former foreign students naturally looked to universities for employment because higher education is exempt from the cap that limits employment opportunities for foreigners in the private sector.

It is important to note that, although higher education is awash in former foreign students looking for jobs, [the total number of college and university employees has stalled for many years](#). In 2010, 3,893,998 people worked in higher education. That total grew to 4,114,069 in 2024, an average net addition of 15,719 jobs per year. In 2025, employment in higher education started to contract, [according to *Inside Higher Ed*](#), which reports that universities cut at least 9,000 jobs that year. This means that the number of foreigners hired by universities each year with H-1B visas now equals or exceeds the net number of jobs created in higher education.

Average net jobs added in higher education from 2010 to 2024 compared to the number of foreigners hired by universities each year with H-1B visas



U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Human Resources component final data (fall 2002 - 2023) and provisional data (fall 2024).

Hiring foreigners may be attractive to universities not only because so many former F-1 visa holders are eagerly seeking jobs, but also because they tend to receive lower salaries. [As a recent analysis by the *Heritage Foundation* found](#), “most H-1B positions pay below-median wages.” Universities have built a giant pipeline of foreign students, especially at the graduate level, that enrolls many times more students than can possibly receive one of the 85,000 private sector H-1B visas if they wish to remain in U.S.-based jobs. If that surplus of foreign students cannot

get an H-1B visa to work for a for-profit company, they have few options other than leaving the U.S. or working in higher education.

The net effect is that foreign nationals constitute *more than one-fifth* of graduate enrollments that serve as the teaching and research assistant workforce. Foreign-born people make up [22 percent of the faculty](#) at universities, and [more than 28 percent of universities had a foreign-born president](#) in the last decade. At elite universities, these numbers are higher. The foreign labor pipeline has changed the composition and priorities of higher education.

How Foreign Labor Alters the Priorities of Higher Education

The average foreign student and former student who works at universities under the OPT or H-1B programs is not engaged in radical political activism; however, the political and security risks arising from the employment of a critical mass of foreign graduate students and foreign workers under the OPT and H-1B programs are very real. This risk manifests in two ways: passively and actively.

The passive risk is that foreign nationals may have significantly less knowledge of and commitment to American values and interests. Universities are supposed to be educational institutions in which essential ideas and values can be transmitted to future generations. If almost half of the graduate students at elite universities and more than one-fifth of their faculty received the bulk of their education abroad, they are unlikely to be well-positioned to teach American values and interests in their classes. Even if they are familiar with those values and interests, foreign instructors are more likely to adopt a detached posture that does not emphasize the strengths of the American political system and the values and culture on which it is based. This neglectful failure to teach basic American values and interests often results in an intellectual disarmament that discourages students from challenging radical, anti-American ideas that others may push on them.

Although it is true that many foreign instructors teach in technical fields, those courses are not value-free in their content. Should there be private ownership and moderate regulation of technical innovations, such as pharmaceuticals or artificial intelligence? Should applied technical fields like medicine or corporate leadership ensure that their fields have proportional representation of various racial, ethnic, and sexual identities? These kinds of questions often arise in university courses, even in scientific fields. The number of foreign instructors in non-technical courses is also on the rise as the total number of foreign employees increases.

The active risk posed by foreign nationals in higher education is less common but more menacing. There are foreign students, foreign graduate instructors, and foreign-born faculty and administrators on campuses who oppose traditional American values and interests and wish to alter them to align with the interests and values of those outside the United States. Some of these foreigners in higher education come to their opposition out of natural affinity. They simply identify with the values and interests of their home country and are bothered by those they find in the United States. Others coordinate their opposition with foreign governments or nongovernmental organizations.

No one knows precisely how large this active opposition is among foreigners in American higher education. But even if the number is small, the danger can be large. It only takes a few highly motivated students and instructors to radicalize enough of the other students to launch disruptive



actions. This influence can occur through formal instruction, as well as discussions in classrooms, dorm rooms, and clubs.

Obviously, universities should foster environments that enable ideas to be challenged and debated, but such tolerance can easily cross into coercion or “groupthink” if the composition of the discussants becomes imbalanced or enables bad actors with strong agendas to short-circuit normal intellectual exchange. To illustrate this point, no one would suggest that it would be sensible U.S. education policy to send all of our best students abroad for college and graduate school. Even if those schools offered higher-quality technical knowledge, there would be dangers to sustaining the American political experiment.

Some argue that good ideas can survive any volume of challenge from bad ideas, but that argument is shockingly naïve about how education works. If we abolished West Point and sent our most promising military students to Chinese universities, we can be sure that coercion and the natural human desire to conform would seduce enough of them away from American values and interests to pose a serious problem. And if grades or opportunities on U.S. campuses are awarded based on adherence to radical ideologies, good ideas are not competing with bad ones on a level playing field. Having foreign students at U.S. universities is educationally beneficial to domestic students, but only if the number of foreign students remains below a critical threshold so as to ensure anti-American values and interests do not dominate.

The Link between Foreign Labor in Higher Education and Campus Protests

High concentrations of foreigners at universities run the risk of spreading radical ideologies among the future American elite who will have key roles in government and business. To gauge whether these longer-term risks are materializing, we can look at the near-term relationship between foreign workers on campus and the number of radical protests. The Hamas invasion of Israel on October 7, 2023, sparked waves of demonstrations at universities, and offer an opportunity to examine the association between foreign workers and increasing radicalization in the campus protests that featured anti-American, anti-Israel, and antisemitic content.

To test whether foreign employment at universities was associated with the number of these protests, we collected data from the [Crowd Counting Consortium at Harvard University](#), which tracks and describes protests. We compiled a list of all protests between October 7, 2023, and December 31, 2024,

involving university groups that were described as opposing Israeli or American actions related to Gaza. In total, we examined 2,331 protests in 831 American cities or towns during this period.

We also identified the number of new or renewed H-1B visas approved for colleges or universities during 2023. Merging these two datasets, we can observe the relationship between the number of foreigners working at universities on H-1B visas in a jurisdiction and the number of protests that took place in that jurisdiction between October 7, 2023, and the end of 2024.

Relationship between foreigners working at universities on H-1B visas and the number of protests in a jurisdiction between October 7, 2023, and the end of 2024

H-1B visas in a jurisdiction in 2023	Average number of protests in a jurisdiction in 2023-24
300+	67.3
200-299	35.7
150-199	26.2
100-149	12.5
50-99	9.5
1-49	1.0

The average number of protests in a city rises dramatically when there are more foreigners working at universities with H-1B visas in that city. In cities with fewer than 50 H-1B workers at universities, there was an average of 1.0 protests during the period examined. When there were between 50 and 99 H-1B workers at universities, the average number of protests rose to 9.5. Between 100 and 149 H-1Bs, the average number of protests was 12.5; between 150 and 199 H-1Bs, the average number of protests was 26.2; between 200 and 299, the average number of protests was 35.7; and when cities had more than 300 H-1B workers at universities, the average number of protests jumped to 67.3.

Graph records new or continuing sponsored H-1B visas. Continued means the H-1B visa has expired but is now continuing or has been renewed by a college or university.

Protests and H-1B visa jurisdictions are sorted by city.

UAsh Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation – Crowd Counting Consortium. (n.d.). *Crowd Counting Consortium*. Harvard Kennedy School. <https://ash.harvard.edu/programs/crowd-counting-consortium/>

The cities with the most H-1B visa holders working at universities are not necessarily the largest cities. For example, New Haven, Connecticut, with [a population of 134,023 as of 2020](#), had 173 H-1Bs approved for universities in 2023 and 48 protests. Other college towns, such as Princeton, New Jersey; Madison, Wisconsin; Ann Arbor, Michigan; and Stanford, California, had more than 167 H-1Bs approved for higher education and at least 21 protests.

Some larger cities had relatively few H-1B visa holders working at universities and a low number of protests. For example, [Kansas City, Missouri, has over a half-million people](#), but it only had six H-1Bs approved for universities and two protests. Phoenix, Arizona, had [1,608,139 people as of the 2020 Census](#) but only fifteen H-1B visas approved for universities and only one protest.

Some college towns had few H-1B visas approved for universities and relatively few protests. For example, Bowling Green, Ohio, is the home of [Bowling Green State University](#), which has approximately 20,000 students. The City of Bowling Green had eight H-1B visas approved for universities and no protests.

About 56 percent of the variance in the number of protests in a city can be explained by how many H-1B visas were approved in 2023 for universities in that city. Using linear regression, we can estimate

that there would be 15.7 additional protests for every 100 H-1B visas approved for universities in a city.

[A prior analysis](#) of the relationship between the percentage of foreign students at a university and campus protests after October 7, 2023, found that the number of protests nearly doubled when the concentration of foreign students exceeded 13 percent of the number of students enrolled. Those results are consistent with the H-1B analysis presented here. Keeping in mind that many F-1 visa holders are graduate students working as teaching and research assistants, both analyses examine the relationship between foreign workers at universities and protest activity. Whether working with an F-1 visa or working with an H-1B visa, higher numbers of foreigners on campus are associated with more anti-American, anti-Israel, and antisemitic protests.

Of course, neither the H-1B nor the F-1 visa analysis proves causation. The kinds of cities and universities that attract more foreign students and workers may also be the kinds of universities that are inclined toward protest activity independent of the influence of foreigners. Nonetheless, these positive associations suggest the plausibility of a causal relationship. If we want to limit the amount of radical activity at universities, we at least need to consider limiting the number of foreign workers in higher education.

Policy Solutions

The Trump administration is aware of the risks associated with excessive foreign influence over American universities, and it offered solutions as part of its [Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education](#) and increased oversight efforts under Section 117 of the Higher Education Act. Unfortunately, the [Compact missed the mark when trying to limit the number of foreigners on campus](#). Specifically, it called for limiting the percentage of foreign students to 15 percent of undergraduate enrollment. But that misses the fact that the bulk of F-1 visa holders are enrolled as graduate students. It also does nothing to address the dramatic rise in H-1B visa approvals for universities. In short, the



Compact does not constrict the pipeline through which large numbers of foreign graduate students flow into university employment.

A more effective solution would be to apply the 15 percent cap on foreign enrollment to all students and not just undergraduates. In addition, the federal government could follow the example set by [Florida](#) and [Texas](#) and pause the approval of new H-1B visas for universities while considering longer-term solutions.

Those solutions could include setting a cap on the total annual number of H-1B visas available for universities, just as there is a cap on H-1Bs for for-profit companies. An annual cap of 10,000 new H-1B visas for higher education would reflect the number approved each year only five years ago. If that level was too high, we could consider a cap for university H-1Bs much lower than 10,000.

Another policy solution is to treat universities the same as for-profit companies and make all of them compete for the same pool of 85,000 H-1Bs approved each year. Similarly, perhaps current F-1 visa holders should not be exempt from the \$100,000 fee for approval of new H-1B visas if the current court hold on enforcement of that provision is lifted. It is unclear why we should give an advantage to Stanford over Google in the competition for foreign labor. And closing the loophole for the H-1B fee applied to current F-1 visa holders would discourage excess numbers of foreigners seeking to enroll at universities to circumvent immigration restrictions.

The recommendation of this report is to rein in foreign enrollments and labor at American universities, not to eliminate them. Current arrangements provide perverse incentives to enroll too many foreign students and for too many of those students to become employed in higher education. This could be remedied by placing caps on the number of F-1 visas as a percentage of enrollment for each university and making universities compete with for-profit companies for the same limited pool of H-1B visas available. Because these policy changes would return the concentrations of foreigners to levels seen in the last few decades, the only noticeable impact they are likely to have on the quality of American higher education will be a wholly desirable reduction of anti-American and antisemitic radicalism on campus.

About the Author

Jay P. Greene serves as Senior Fellow at the Defense of Freedom Institute. He focuses on combating antisemitism in K–12 education, higher education, and teacher unions. Prior to joining DFI, Jay was a Senior Research Fellow at The Heritage Foundation where his research examined education's role in character formation, civic values, and institutional governance. He previously served for more than sixteen years at the University of Arkansas as Distinguished Professor and Chair of the Department of Education Reform, a department he founded and led. Earlier in his career, Jay held faculty appointments at the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Houston and was a Senior Fellow at the Manhattan Institute.

Jay has authored or co-authored hundreds of peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, and opinion pieces on education reform, school choice, higher education governance, and antisemitism in education. His work has appeared in leading academic journals and major national media outlets.

Jay earned his B.A. in History, summa cum laude, from Tufts University and received his Ph.D. in Government from Harvard University.

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