

ADVERTISEMENT

LEADERSHIP > EDUCATION

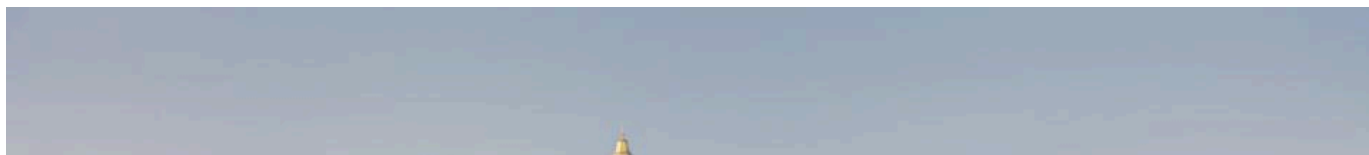
Five Major Questions Facing America’s Research Universities This Fall

By Michael T. Nietzel, Senior Contributor. © Michael Nietzel, former college...

Follow Author

Published Sep 01, 2025, 06:00am EDT

 Share  Save  Comment 0



Flash Sale: Less than \$1/week

Sign In



Harvard University, where several of the major challenges facing research universities will play out this fall semester.

GETTY

Now that the fall semester is underway at most of the nation's colleges and universities, attention turns to several major challenges to higher education, most of them posed by federal policies and funding decisions made by the Trump administration. Those concerns span areas of enrollment, budgets, research funding, and the status of the faculty.

Here are five questions of particular salience to research universities, which have been the most frequent target of federal government interventions this year.

What will happen to enrollment of international students?

Based on a [projection](#) that U.S. colleges and universities could see their international student enrollment decline by as many as 150,000 students this fall, university officials are closely monitoring the number of international students returning or beginning at their institutions.

In the 2023-24 academic year, 1,126,690 international college students were enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities, according to the Institute of International Education's [Open Doors](#) report. That number was an all-time high, representing about 6% of all college students in the nation, but at some individual institutions like New York University, Johns Hopkins and Columbia University, international students account for more than a third of the student body.

It's too early to tell what overall international enrollment will look like this year. So far, the news is mixed. The University of Buffalo and Arizona State University have both reported [substantial declines](#), but [initial data from](#)

[Columbia University and Princeton University](#) showed their international enrollment holding steady compared to last year. Other schools have indicated that some international students were facing difficulties associated with visa processing, delaying their entry into the country.

MORE FOR YOU

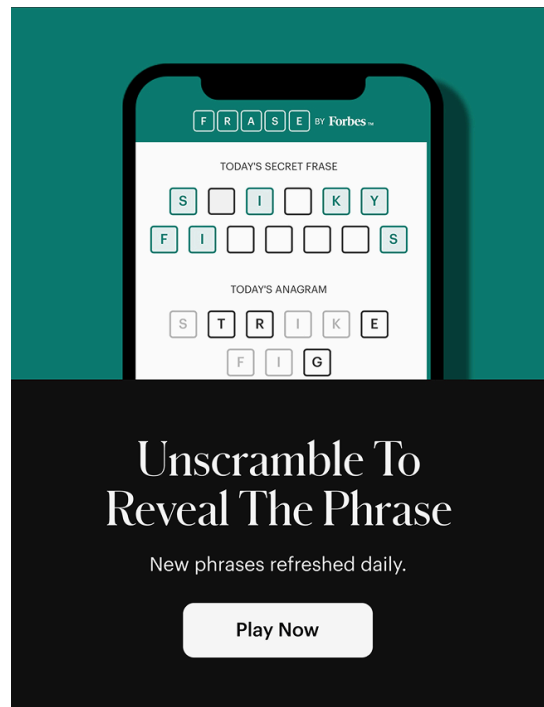
The Top 10 Richest People In The World | September 2025



Labor Day Omnilux Sale: This Editor-Favorite LED Face Mask Is \$50 Off Right Now



A 'Blood Moon' Eclipse And A 'Planet Parade': The Night Sky This Week



The Trump administration's antipathy toward foreign students has manifested in several ways, including denials or slowdowns in the issuing of visas, calls for the deportation of students who — according to Secretary of State Marco Rubio — “abuse our hospitality,” heightened controls over immigration, and travel bans against several countries.

Worries that international enrollments would plummet because of Trump's anti-immigrant policies were reinforced this week by a Department of Homeland Security [proposal](#) that would limit the length of time foreign students would be allowed to stay in the United States.

CEO: C-suite news, analysis, and advice for top decision makers right to your inbox.

Email Address

Sign Up

By signing up, you agree to receive this newsletter, other updates about Forbes and its affiliates' offerings, our [Terms of Service](#) (including resolving disputes on an individual basis via arbitration), and you acknowledge our [Privacy Statement](#). Forbes is protected by reCAPTCHA, and the Google [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#) apply.

The effects of these various policies will be better understood when more complete enrollment numbers are available in about a month.

How many more institutions will be forced to cut their budgets?

The past few months have seen a steady parade of prominent research universities announcing multi-million dollar reductions in their budgets, typically involving staff layoffs, academic program terminations, reduced graduate admissions, and curtailment of many other activities.

These cutbacks have been attributed to a combination of factors — fewer international students and a corresponding dip in tuition revenue, reduced federal research support, lowered Medicaid coverage, enrollment declines, and increased debt — leading to a downsizing at institutions that traditionally have experienced only steady expansion.

The University of Chicago is slashing \$100 million in expenditures. Stanford University is laying off staff as it cuts \$140 million from its budget. Michigan State University, the University of Nebraska, Northwestern University, Cornell University, the University of Southern California and Duke University are among other research powerhouses announcing major spending budget reductions.

At this point, the major question facing university leaders is not whether this constriction will continue, but how far will it extend.

How will litigation involving cutbacks to federal research be resolved?

Earlier this year four federal agencies announced that they would cap their reimbursement of indirect research costs on research grants to 15%, far below the rates historically paid to most universities.

Indirect costs — also known as facilities and administrative costs — refer to the costs of conducting research that are not attributable to any one investigation. They include items like large-scale computer systems, maintenance of equipment, facility upgrades, the operation of labs, depreciation, employment of support staff, accounting, research compliance, legal expenses, and the salaries of key administrators in charge of an institution's research enterprise.

Numerous universities, higher education associations and state attorneys general, quickly filed lawsuits against the 15% caps the National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health, Department of Defense, and Department of Energy wanted to impose. In each case, a federal judge has ordered a temporary stop to the caps, but those decisions involve only temporary injunctions that are being appealed by the government.

Will the caps eventually be found to be illegal, or will the courts allow the four agencies to set new limits on their research grants? If the latter, universities will either need to reduce their research portfolio or make up for the reduced funds with their own money, which will jeopardize other funding priorities.

A recent, split Supreme Court decision allowing the government to cancel about 900 NIH grants should give university leaders reason for concern about how the Court might view the indirect cap controversy. By a vote of 5-4, the justices agreed that NIH could terminate \$783 million in grants linked to DEI initiatives. In an unsigned

[order](#), the Court paused a ruling by a federal judge in Massachusetts that required the federal government to continue making the payments. But — also by a vote of 5-4 — the court left stand a different portion of the judge's ruling that had thrown out NIH guidance describing the agency's priorities.

Will universities be able to rely on the courts to defend them from the government's use of research grants as leverage to require them to change policies that align with President Trump's policy preferences? It's not clear at this point, but the conservative majority of the Court has been inclined so far to give the president broad executive powers.

Will more universities cut deals with the administration?

At this point, nine research universities have had all or most of their federal research funds frozen by the administration over allegations of violations of civil rights laws or other typically unproven accusations. Although some of the funding has begun flowing again as a result of deals cut with the administration, [almost \\$6 billion in total was put at risk](#) at Harvard, Duke, UCLA, Northwestern, Cornell, Princeton, Brown, Columbia and the University of Pennsylvania.

According to various media reports, Cornell, Harvard and UCLA are in discussions about settlements with the federal government. Should any of those deals come together, they would join Columbia, Brown and the University of Pennsylvania in reaching agreements with the Trump administration in recent months. Columbia paid \$221 million as part of its resolution. Brown struck a \$50 million deal to resolve its dispute. Penn did not pay a monetary settlement as part of its agreement to no longer permit transgender athletes to compete in female varsity sports.

The outcomes of the still-unresolved cases will be monitored closely. Will Harvard settle and pony up the \$500 million Trump has demanded, or will it continue its lawsuit against the university? Will UCLA buckle to the administration or resist it as California Governor Gavin Newsom has urged? What other universities are on the administration's firing line?

The stakes in these disputes are high. Institutional autonomy is under assault. Academic freedom is at risk. University leadership is being politicized. Whether American universities will continue as a global leader for scientific research hinges in large measure in how these cases will be concluded.

Will attacks on faculty influence continue?

For years, legislators in predominantly conservative states have attempted to end or weaken college faculty tenure. Those strategies have largely been unsuccessful, although some of tenure's traditional protections have been chipped away.

Now, the target appears to be shifting. Instead of trying to eliminate tenure, a growing number of states are weakening the role of senior faculty in university decision-making. A prime example is Texas, which passed a wide-ranging law this year that diminishes the size, influence and independence of the faculty senates at its public colleges and universities.

[Senate Bill 37](#), authored by Texas State Senator Brandon Creighton, R-Conroe, contains several elements that significantly strengthen the power of university governing boards and central administrators over the curriculum, hiring of university personnel, program review and other academic matters. Effective on September 1, the bill strips away much of the authority that duly constituted faculty bodies have held under the traditional norms of shared governance and shifts it to the political appointees who constitute institutional governing boards.

According to the new law, "only the governing board of an institution of higher education may establish a faculty council or senate at the institution." If a board decides to do away with such a body, the law permits it. Several governing boards of public universities in the state — including those at the University of Texas, Texas State University and the University of Houston — have already taken advantage of the SB 37 and dissolved their senates, aiming to replace them with councils that would have only advisory roles.

Indiana and Utah have also passed laws limiting the powers of faculty senates, and the University of Kentucky did so on its own initiative, disbanding its university senate and thereby stripping faculty of decision-making power over academic matters.

Faculty are understandably alarmed about this trend, viewing it as part of a growing agenda to limit their academic freedom and influence. Look for more attempts at collective faculty action through groups like the American Association of University Professors and calls for “[mutual defense compacts](#)” like those introduced at several Big Ten universities. At the same time, it’s far from certain that those efforts will be able to slow down the legislative momentum against faculty governance bodies now underway.

[Editorial Standards](#)[Reprints & Permissions](#)

Find [Michael T. Nietzel](#) on X.

[Follow Author](#)

Join The Conversation

Comments 0

One Community. Many Voices. Create a free account to share your thoughts. Read our community guidelines [here](#).

[See All Comments \(0\)](#)

RELATED TOPICS

SEE ALSO



Forbes

© 2025 Forbes Media LLC. All Rights Reserved.

- [AdChoices](#) [Privacy Statement](#) [✔✕ Your Privacy Choices](#) [Cookie Preferences](#) [Digital Terms of Sale](#) [Terms of Service](#)
- [Contact Us](#) [Send Us Feedback](#) [Report a Security Issue](#) [Jobs At Forbes](#) [Reprints & Permissions](#) [Forbes Press Room](#)

Advertise