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DHS threatens to revoke Harvard's eligibility to host foreign students amid broader battle over universities' autonomy

By Taylor Romine, Nouran Salahieh, Hanna Park and Andy Rose, CNN
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Yale Law Professor Bruce Ackerman tells CNN's Omar Jimenez the White House's escalating attacks on Harvard University are "unprecedented."



(CNN) — The Trump administration has significantly dialed up its pressure on Harvard University, not only freezing \$2 billion in federal funding but now threatening its eligibility to host international students after school leaders refused to make key policy changes the White House also is demanding of other elite US colleges.

Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem sent Harvard “a scathing letter demanding detailed records on Harvard’s foreign student visa holders’ illegal and violent activities by April 30, 2025, or face immediate loss of Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) certification,” her agency said Wednesday in a news release that refers to antisemitism but does not detail specific incidents.

The letter, which the government did not immediately release, accuses Harvard of creating a “hostile learning environment” for Jewish students, the Harvard Crimson student newspaper reported, adding, “It is a privilege to have foreign students attend Harvard University, not a guarantee.”

Harvard is aware of the letter and stands by its previous statement it “will not surrender its independence or relinquish its constitutional rights,” a spokesperson said late Wednesday.

CNN has reached out to the Department of Homeland Security and its Immigration and Customs Enforcement unit, which is in charge of the Student and Exchange Visitor Program, for more information.

Noem’s letter followed Harvard’s refusal this week to submit to the Republican administration’s demands it eliminate diversity, equity and inclusion programs, ban masks at campus protests, enact merit-based hiring and admissions

reforms, and reduce the power of faculty and administrators the White House has called “more committed to activism than scholarship.”

The Ivy League school near Boston appears to be the first elite US university to rebuke the demands. Trump officials say they aim to banish antisemitism following contentious campus protests over the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza and to root out DEI practices – designed to advance racial, gender, class and other representation – they decry as “illegal and immoral discrimination.”

The Trump administration more broadly has moved to revoke the visas of hundreds of students, faculty and researchers at dozens of US universities and colleges. Some are high-profile cases involving alleged support of terror organizations, while others involve relatively minor offenses, such as years-old misdemeanors.

The Internal Revenue Service, meanwhile, also is making plans to rescind Harvard's tax-exempt status, two sources familiar with the matter told CNN.

And Noem on Wednesday announced the cancellation of an additional \$2.7 million in federal violence prevention grants for a Harvard program her agency says “branded conservatives as far-right dissidents in a shockingly skewed study” and another it describes as “public health propaganda,” the Department of Homeland Security news release said, adding, “Both undermine America's values and security.”

The Trump administration on Monday said it was freezing \$2.2 billion in grants and contracts to Harvard as other institutions, including Princeton, Cornell and Northwestern universities, also have seen federal funding paused.

What losing SEVP access could mean

Educational institutions are required to have SEVP certification with ICE in order to admit applicants who have an F-1 or M-1 student visa. The certification does not directly affect Harvard's exchange students in the J-1 visa program, which is administered separately by the State Department.

Around 15,000 educational institutions in the US have SEVP certification. About 200 institutions lose their certification each year – in many cases because they go out of business, according to an ICE fact sheet.

Harvard's 6,793 international students comprise 27.2% of its enrollment in the 2024-25 academic year, university data shows. It was not immediately clear how many attend Harvard on F-1 visas that would be directly affected by the loss of SEVP certification.

The Trump administration's letter asks the university to provide information on visa holders' "known threats to other students or university personnel," "obstruction of the school's learning environment" and any disciplinary actions "taken as a result of making threats to other students or populations or participating in protests," The Crimson reported.

Harvard "will continue to comply with the law and expect the Administration to do the same," its spokesperson's Wednesday statement said. "If federal action is taken against a member of our community, we expect it will be based on clear evidence, follow established legal procedures, and respect the constitutional rights afforded to all individuals."

This story has been updated with additional information.

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CNN's Lauren Mascarenhas contributed to this report.