

Harvard, MIT sue Trump govt over order revoking visas for foreign students

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Harvard and MIT asked a court Wednesday to block an order by President Donald Trump's administration threatening the visas of foreign students whose entire courses have moved online because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The universities' lawsuit was in response to an announcement Monday by

the US Immigration and Custom Enforcement (ICE) that the affected students must leave the country or transfer to a school offering in-person tuition.

"We will pursue this case vigorously so that our international students, and international students at institutions across the country, can continue their studies without the threat of deportation," Harvard President Lawrence Bacow said in a statement.

Trump is pushing universities and schools to fully open when the new academic year starts in September despite the US registering record COVID-19 cases.

ICE said in its announcement the State Department would not issue visas to students enrolled in programs that are fully online for the fall semester and such students would not be allowed to enter the country.

Universities with a hybrid system of in-person and online classes will have to show that foreign students are taking as many in-person classes as possible, to maintain their status.

The measure was seen as a move by the White House to put pressure on educational institutions that are adopting a cautious approach to reopening amid the global COVID-19 pandemic.

"The order came down without notice—its cruelty surpassed only by its recklessness," Bacow said.

He added it was made "without regard to concerns for the health and safety of students, instructors and others."

The universities say in their lawsuit that the order would harm students "immensely," both personally and financially.

It describes the order as "arbitrary and capricious" and says it threw US higher education "into chaos."

There were more than one million international students in the US for the 2018-19 academic year, according to the Institute of International Education (IIE).

The plaintiffs ask that the court issue a temporary restraining order and "permanent injunctive relief" preventing the policy being enforced.

They also ask that the order be declared unlawful, that their legal costs are covered, and that they receive any other relief that the court deems appropriate.

'Ridiculous'

The lawsuit, filed in Boston, lists the defendants as ICE and the United States Department of Homeland Security.

The US posted a daily high of 60,209 new coronavirus infections on Tuesday, Johns Hopkins University said, and the country topped three million cases on Wednesday.

The disease has claimed more than 131,000 lives across America.

Most US colleges and universities have not yet announced their plans for the fall semester but Harvard has said all its classes for the 2020-21 academic year will be conducted online "with rare exceptions."

Some 40 percent of undergraduates will be allowed to return to campus, but their instruction will be conducted remotely.

It says packed classrooms endanger the health of students and teachers.

Trump has branded the decision "ridiculous" as he takes a bullish approach to reopening the country ahead of November's presidential vote, when he seeks reelection.

While cracking down on immigration is one of his key issues, Trump has taken a particularly hard stance on foreigners since the health crisis began.

In June, he froze until 2021 the issuing of green cards—which offer permanent US resident status—and some work visas, particularly those used in the technology sector.

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