

Equity Committee
Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation
American Federation of Teachers, Local 3544
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The Equity Committee of GTFF, the union of University of Oregon's graduate employees, opposes the proposed rule changes to the "duration of status" policies of F, J, and I Visas. We are writing in solidarity with and as representatives of the international graduate students and employees at the University of Oregon. We want the Department of Homeland Security to rescind their proposed changes to the visa status of international and exchange students, scholars and media representatives outlined in the proposed rules on September 25, 2020.

The Equity Committee has been working with our international members closely to help them navigate the multitude of hardships and inequities thrown at them at every step of their time here as graduate students and employees. These scholars, researchers and educators are constantly battling the nation's misrepresentations of them as conspiring aliens or untrustworthy opportunity-seekers. They are subjected to bias, discrimination, microaggressions and scrutiny by their colleagues, students, supervisors, professors and the university administration on a regular basis, due to their constructed image by the federal government and mainstream media. On top that, they have to live in constant fear of the DHS or ICE imposing unprecedented and unpredictable rules on their educational, professional and personal codes of conduct frequently. We are constantly reading news of unfounded allegations on international students, ungrounded arrests and deportations. We are witnessing downgrading of offices, resources and services for international students in universities, including our own. The new proposed rule changes by DHS is one more intellectual assault on them, which will pose additional challenges to the completion of their studies and graduation.

During this global pandemic, international students in the USA have no access to local or national aids, while they have to pay much more in taxes, insurance and fees than their domestic counterparts. Their material conditions are compromised, access to resources restricted and even prohibited; yet they continue to prioritize and pursue their studies and work respectfully and diligently. Instead of utilizing their time and energy like their domestic colleagues, they have to spend an outstanding amount of time defending their existence and ethics in the face of federal regulations like the ones DHS is proposing now. They cannot legally and forcefully organize against these attacks on their basic integrities, because this country does not protect or support their rights. Many such unaccounted for labor and trauma frequently interrupt their student and work lives, while they are expected to keep performing their roles as non-resisting students, researchers and educators full time, with no digressions or distractions.

F and J visas are currently issued under a "duration of status" policy, according to which, international students can remain in the USA as long as they are maintaining their status as a

full-time student. The new proposals would retract this flexibility and allow international students only a fixed number of years (2-4 years) to complete their studies. A possibility of extension is mentioned in the new proposed rules, with no specific details or guarantee that the extensions would be available and achievable to all students in need of those. They would also be required to leave the USA within 30 days of the expiration of their visas (instead of the existing 60-day window) or completion of studies (whichever happens first, in the scenario that they do not get an extension). Now, even if the visa extension is a real option, it still means that international students will have to apply to renew /extend their visas with the possibility of getting rejected, which happens more often than we are made aware of. The application process for visa renewal is not only cumbersome, but also an extremely expensive endeavour. The application fee is about 160\$ for most countries (more in some countries) and they will have to pay this nonrefundable fee every time they apply for an extension of their visas, even if those get rejected. If they can gather enough money to reapply, that is not the only expense they would have to bear either.

A lot of international students will have to travel to their home country or to another country like Canada or Mexico or the capital of the USA, to find a consulate, where they can file a visa application. This process often takes days and weeks, during which they have to remain in the place where the consulate is and where they have filed their application or make preparations to return to whenever they are called upon while their application is under review. This adds not only the pressure of interstate or international traveling expenses, but also the expenses to wait and live in that city/country until the visa application is processed and a result is received. So, if an international student is coming for a Graduate program for 5 years with a fixed visa for 2/4 years, there is no guarantee that they would ever be able to finish their studies. Rejection of visa extension application is arbitrary and a real threat. If they do not get a visa extension, or cannot afford to travel to file for an extension within the expiration of their visa, they would be deported in 30 days. No university, federal government representative or other legal institution takes the liability of an international student whose visa has not been renewed, or who receives a deportation notification. It will solely be looked at as the misfortune, failure or inability of the international student, to not be able to extend their visa or complete their studies, if this scenario occurs. Thus the international students will be further gaslighted and victimized during their time of crisis. The proposed rule changes will thus set future international students up for failure and anxiety only, in a climate that is already hostile and vindictive towards them.

If they are expected to finish their graduate studies within 2 to 4 years, that would restrict which programs or disciplines they can even apply to, as most graduate degrees take longer to complete than 2 or 4 years. It will put unattainable expectations on them, and failure to achieve those unrealistic goals will threaten the continuation and completion of their degrees. Our Equity Committee thus finds the new proposed rule changes to be extremely inequitable and unfair to international students, who are irreplaceable members of our community. DHS' proposed rule changes are toxic to the intellectual, mental and ethical health and integrity of our

international members. Hence, we stand with our international colleagues, despise and disapprove of these proposed rule changes.