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College decision time is always stressful for students. Trump is making it a lot worse.

Adding to the angst in choosing a college this year: “What did President Trump just say?”

By [Patricia Wen](#) Globe Staff, Updated April 8, 2025, 11:40 a.m.



ALEX WILLIAM FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

In less than three months, President Trump has upended the world of higher education. He's launched reviews of billions of dollars in federal funding at elite schools, including [\\$9 billion dollars for Harvard](#). He withdrew \$400 million from Columbia University. His administration has threatened to shutter academic programs he deems part of the "radical left."

Meanwhile, international students are terrified after a spate of surprise arrests and detentions, [including of a Tufts graduate student taken into custody](#) off a Somerville street last month. Trump's orders have spared few places: His administration is also [investigating "racial preferences"](#) in programs at 45 universities, including MIT, the University of Rhode Island, and Yale. College officials worry whether they'll be able to fully deliver on financial aid offers and wonder if campus "free speech" will be relegated to a concept taught only in history courses.

It's all more than stressful enough for the students currently on campuses. But for millions of high school seniors weighing where to attend college, the barrage is yet another stressor in the selection process that peaks this time of year. Nearly all have received their final acceptances and rejections, and now the clock is ticking — they generally have until May 1 to make a final decision.

For many, the unprecedented upheaval in higher education seems a cruelty on top of all the hard work they did to get to this point — studying for good grades and test scores, trying to accumulate an impressive list of activities, and toiling over application essays. Some have chosen to tune out from the daily headlines as best they can, at least temporarily, even as they worry about the lasting effects of Trump's decisions.

"I'm trying not to pay a lot of attention to the news," says Chanel Rodriguez Baez, a senior at City on a Hill, a charter high school in Roxbury.

The first in her family to go to college, she wants to be a nurse and is trying to decide between Northeastern University and the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences. But she needs a good financial aid package that she can rely on for four years —

and that's her single focus at the moment. She's been rattled by [Trump's orders to dismantle the Department of Education](#) and threats to yank federal funding, all the things that could affect her grants and loans.

“Why are they taking money away from students?” she says. The younger generations “are the ones that will make this country better.”

College counselors are advising most seniors to try not to let the latest whiplash news affect their final decisions too much, and to stay focused on the key questions that drove them to figure out where to apply to in the first place: *Does the school offer the classes I want? What is the campus culture? Can I afford it?*

“Keep an open mind and visit the campus,” advises Michele Hernández Bayliss, cofounder of [Top Tier Admissions](#), a private college consulting firm based in Weybridge, Vermont, and Concord, Massachusetts.

The role of politics was impossible to entirely screen out for Toby Sillman, a 17-year-old Brookline High School senior, when he considered applying early to Columbia University. Few places have seen more campus turmoil over the last two years: major encampments protesting the Israel-Hamas war and concerns about antisemitism, followed this year by Trump's move to cut \$400 million in federal funding. Columbia's president [ultimately agreed to a list of concessions](#), and has since resigned, and the campus is roiling yet again.

But Sillman considers himself lucky to have been accepted — Columbia's acceptance rate is about 4 percent — and is focused on the qualities that drew him to apply. He has fond memories of growing up in New York City until he was 12. Columbia has a major called “sustainable development” that intrigues him and a rigorous core curriculum. As he sees it, Columbia promises “a great intellectual community in the world's greatest city.”

When people refer to all of Columbia's political turbulence, Sillman does not see it as a negative — as long as safety is ensured for everyone and education isn't disrupted. It can

be a sign of passionate engagement with the world. Joining a college where “students aren’t afraid to speak their mind” is a positive, he says.

Sallie Langston Batchelor, a college counselor in Northampton, expects that most high school seniors will focus on selecting the college that will deliver them the best education and credentials for their future — and the campus environment will be a major factor only if it’s a close call.

“While many students are concerned about the political climate at Columbia, for example, in my experience most would not turn down Columbia to attend a less selective institution, all things being equal,” she says. “But if you have a choice between two peer institutions, it’s a different discussion. Then you might look more closely at culture and fit.”

Campus culture has long been on the mind of Kurtis Powers, 18, a Wilmington High School musician and former football player, who came out as gay in his sophomore year. For a time this past year, he considered Belmont University in Nashville, for its lively music scene. But then he began to view the state — through its legislation banning gender-affirming care for trans youth among other proposals — as hostile to people in the LBGTQ+ world.

“I worry about how the next four years will go for me,” Powers says. He recently scratched Belmont and other schools in politically conservative states off his list.

He is now debating mainly between University of Vermont in Burlington and University of Massachusetts Amherst, two schools where he expects to find a supportive community. At this point, he’s weighing nonpolitical factors, such as which has the better music program or whether UMass’s larger size offers him more academic options. He’d be closer to his parents if he goes to Amherst (a plus), but if he goes to UVM, he’ll often see his sister, who already goes to college there (also a plus). Going to college in a more liberal state feels like an extra layer of safety.

Olin Rose-Bardawil, a 17-year-old cross country runner, is facing the difficult choice between two liberal arts schools that he likes almost equally — Tufts University in Medford and Davidson College in North Carolina. He’s enjoying finally being in the driver’s seat for a few weeks: He now gets to judge the best school for him, as opposed to feeling judged all year by colleges evaluating his applications.

A senior at the private Williston Northampton School, Rose-Bardawil says a number of factors will influence his choice, including athletic programs and school spirit. “I’m a big sports fan,” he says.

He cares about politics, but in choosing where to apply, he deliberately stayed away from colleges that seemed to have deeply polarizing environments. “I want there to be a middle where people can talk,” he says.

Kurtis Powers and other students are trying to keep their college decisions in perspective — they figure college campuses, even in red states, are likely to be more tolerant than you might find in the outside world. But if the politics of this country become even more alarming and divisive within the next four years, Powers wouldn’t rule out a bigger change, maybe even transferring.

“I might want to go to school in Europe,” he says.

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