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Elon Musk's brief Stanford affiliation raises questions about previous immigration status



Musk's two-day stint in 1995 at a Stanford graduate studies program — before he left to launch his first company, Zip2 — has been an important element of his entrepreneurial persona. (Graphic: DA-HEE KIM/The Stanford Daily)

By [George Porteous](#)

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Decades before he became the world's wealthiest person and a major supporter of President-elect Donald Trump, tech mogul Elon Musk gained acceptance to a graduate program at Stanford — one he never pursued.

Instead, Musk, born in South Africa, leveraged his brief affiliation with the University to claim temporary legal immigration status and launch

his first company, even as he [worked illegally](#) in the United States, according to former business associates and documents obtained by The Washington Post last month.

The reporting on Musk's immigration status in the 1990s came just before the presidential election, which saw Trump [re-elected](#) partly on a promise to launch mass deportations against undocumented immigrants. Musk, who [donated](#) more than \$100 million to Trump's campaign and frequently joined the president-elect at his rallies, is a vocal critic of illegal immigration.

"We should not be allowing people in the country if they're breaking the law," he [said](#) during a visit to the U.S.-Mexico border in 2023.

Musk's two-day stint in 1995 at a Stanford graduate studies program — before he left to launch his first company, Zip2 — has been an important element of his entrepreneurial persona.

The Post cited a 2020 podcast interview, in which Musk said, "I was legally there, but I was meant to be doing student work. I was allowed to do work sort of supporting whatever."

Luisa Rapport, director of media relations for the University, confirmed in an email to The Daily that Musk applied and was accepted to a graduate program in materials science and engineering. However, Rapport wrote that the University does not have "any record of him enrolling."

Despite openly discussing his withdrawal from graduate studies at Stanford, Musk has never publicly addressed its connection to his legal work status. According to legal experts who spoke to The Post, his decision to leave the program and pursue a startup meant he had no legal basis to remain in the United States.

At a 2013 event, Musk's brother and Zip2 co-founder, Kimbal Musk, [recalled](#) that the brothers "were illegal immigrants." Elon Musk responded on stage that it was "more of a gray area."

Derek Proudian, a former Zip2 board member, told The Washington Post that their immigration status at the time "was not what it should be for them to be legally employed running a company in the U.S."

The Post also reported on a 2005 email, in which Musk wrote to two co-founders of Tesla that he applied to Stanford to stay in the U.S.

"Actually, I didn't really care much for the degree, but I had no money for a lab and no legal right to stay in the country, so that seemed like a good way to solve both issues," Musk reportedly wrote. "Then the internet came along, which seemed like a much surer bet."

President Joe Biden [criticized](#) Musk for hypocrisy at a Democratic campaign event following the Washington Post report. "He was supposed to be in school when he came on a student visa," Biden said. "He wasn't in school. He was violating the law. He's talking about all these 'illegals' coming our way."

Following those remarks, Musk denied working illegally in the United States. "I was in fact allowed to work in the US," he [wrote](#) on X.

The Daily has reached out to Elon Musk and his attorney, Alex Spiro, for comment.

In 2022, before acquiring Twitter and renaming the platform X, Musk shared a letter he received from emeritus professor of materials science and engineering William Nix M.S. '60 Ph.D. '63 regarding the use of silicon for lithium batteries. "Nice letter from Bill Nix, who would've been my prof at Stanford if I hadn't put grad studies on (permanent) deferment," Musk [captioned](#) the image, in a tweet that amassed over 100,000 likes.

Nix told The Daily he sent the letter following a 2022 interview in which Musk [said](#) Nix was “the guy I spoke to when I said that I would like to put my studies on hold.”

Although he did not see “any reason to doubt” Musk’s account, and acknowledged it was plausible, Nix said he had “no memory” of meeting Musk in 1995.

Nix also said Musk’s decision to withdraw from the program to pursue entrepreneurship would have been “extremely rare” among materials science students at the time. “I can’t remember any other case where someone came, became a student and then immediately went off and started [a company],” he said.

Numerous articles and online biographies have [claimed](#) that, in addition to materials science, Musk also began a doctoral program in applied physics at Stanford. In an email to The Daily, however, the University only confirmed Musk’s application and acceptance to Stanford’s “materials science and engineering graduate program.”

Professor Aharon Kapitulnik was chair of admissions for the applied physics department for several years before becoming department chair in September 1996. He wrote to The Daily that he does not “remember the application, nor [do] I remember Musk as a graduate student.”

Kapitulnik added that Stanford graduate programs, including the applied physics department, accepted top students from around the world in the 1990s.

The department, he wrote, “strives for quality of the graduate students that we admit. We do not consider Visas or any other quotas.”

Musk appears to be playing a major role in Trump’s presidential transition and recently [joined](#) the president-elect for a call with Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Trump has also praised

Musk's approach to cost-cutting in business, fueling speculation that Musk could [lead](#) efforts to slash government spending.

In a Sunday post on X, Musk [voiced](#) his support for “ensuring that maniacally dedicated small-government revolutionaries join this administration!”

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