

The Campus Influence Debate and American Security

Testimony by Robert Daly

Senior Fellow, The Asia Society, Center on U.S.-China Relations

Former Director, Kissinger Institute on China and the United States, The Wilson Center

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Good Morning Chairman Cassidy and Ranking Member Sanders. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. As you know, the goals of today's hearing are (1) to assess the state of malign foreign influence in American higher education, and (2) to ask how academia and government can enhance their cooperation to protect research integrity and promote national security.

The Issue to Date

The title of this hearing is “*Exposing Malign Foreign Influence in Higher Education*,” but it isn't really a question of exposition, for the issue is no longer new: Congress, higher educational institutions and associations, the White House, and the departments of Justice, State, and Education have been asking whether the openness of American campuses constitutes a national security vulnerability for at least a decade.

It's a question I have long taken seriously. I first testified on the subject to a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee in June of 2015. I published Anne Marie Brady's groundbreaking *Magic Weapons: China's political influence activities under Xi Jinping* on the Wilson Center website in September of 2017ⁱ. I mentored Anna Lloyd-Damnjanovic's influential monograph *A Preliminary Study of PRC Political Influence and Interference Activities in American Higher Education* in 2018ⁱⁱ and wrote a chapter on China's attempts to influence American local governments for the 2018 Hoover Institute study, *China's Influence & American Interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance*ⁱⁱⁱ. I have mentored young scholars' reports on China's transnational repression of Uighurs^{iv} and Chinese government campaigns to influence Latin American media^v. I have visited American campuses to discuss the implications of U.S.-China rivalry and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) activities for their research security and academic freedom. In 2023, I worked on the National Academies team that wrote the Congressionally-mandated report: *Foreign-Funded Language and Culture Institutes at U.S. Institutions of Higher Education: Practices to Assess and Mitigate Risk*.^{vi}

The campus influence debate arose because universities, faculty, and researchers that had been encouraged to cooperate with foreign scholars and institutions—especially China—during the era of engagement did not immediately change their paradigm when we entered the age of rivalry. This was understandable, as academia had benefitted from and mobilized for cooperation and had believed, with evidence, that attracting foreign scholars to the U.S. and establishing American

universities as the model for other countries were soft power wins for America. When our national security agencies began to see cooperation not as a pillar of soft power, but as a vulnerability born of naivete, or worse, higher educational organizations took time to adjust. Universities are complex institutions: turning them around is more difficult than turning an aircraft carrier. The national transition from attitudes of engagement to attitudes of adversity, furthermore, was not stark; it was gradual and contested. The debate about interaction with countries of concern continues to this day in executive suites and communities across the country. Washington itself still has contradictory impulses in this regard.

After a decade of intense interaction between Washington agencies and American universities, however, the news is mostly good. Higher educational institutions have taken concern about malign foreign influence to heart. Protection of research integrity and compliance with Washington directives are now first principles on campuses across the United States. The Confucius Institutes are gone. Most STEM collaborations between American and Chinese universities have shuttered—whether for good or ill, I don't know—but the closings are clear evidence that caution is now the watchword in academia.

The scope of the problem, moreover, appears to be manageable. There have been no convictions for espionage by university persons acting on behalf of China, although there have been numerous cases of program fraud, failure to support foreign sources of funding, failure to report connections to Chinese military universities, and some suspects have settled prior to conviction. Thankfully, many national leaders have toned down their rhetoric and now stress that the excellence and openness of universities are central to American power and prosperity.

We began to address the issue of malign foreign interference constructively with the 2020 National Defense Authorization Act. Section 1746, “Securing American Science and Technology,” charged the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy and the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine with coordinating “activities to protect federally funded research and development from foreign interference, cyberattacks, theft, or espionage and to develop common definitions and best practices for federal science agencies and grantees, while accounting for the importance of the open exchange of ideas and international talent required for scientific progress and American leadership in science and technology.”

In January 2021, the first Trump Administration issued National Security Presidential Memorandum (NSPM) 33, which mandated federal interagency efforts to address these threats. This work was taken up by President Biden's OSTP which, in August 2021, issued an interim NSPM-33 briefing making clear that research integrity could be pursued in ways that protected America's openness and weren't conducive to xenophobia or prejudice^{vii}.

In summary, the needed sea change in university attitudes toward malign foreign influence has already occurred. Continued vigilance is warranted, but there is no need for alarm; academia and government have demonstrated that, together, they are up to the task of protecting our campuses. Disclosure requirements under Section 117 of the Higher Education Act and various

other foreign funding reporting requirements, including those created under NDAs and the bipartisan CHIPS and Science Acts, can and should be amended to improve transparency. Vigilance should be and is woven into the administration of every college and university because research integrity is one of their highest values, not because the presence of foreigners on campus constitutes an emergency.

Another period of intense government focus on universities as alleged vectors of malign foreign influence would be unjustified by evidence, harmful to the excellence of higher education, and a dangerous distraction from major security threats posed to the United States by China and other countries of concern. The creation or expansion of new or existing reporting requirements must therefore be done in a manner that builds on existing rules, harmonizes reporting requirements across federal agencies, and in a way that allows for the continuation of non-malign foreign partnerships and international exchanges.

Exaggerating Foreign Influence on Campuses Threatens American Security

The 2025 National Security Strategy makes clear that technological innovation is a pillar of American power. NSS authors promise to “ensure that U.S. technology and U.S. standards—particularly in AI, biotech, and quantum computing—drive the world forward.” They note that the “technology sector, which undergirds our economy, provides a qualitative edge to our military, and strengthens our global influence.”^{viii}

The NSS repeatedly invokes tech innovation as one of America’s greatest assets, yet it says nothing about where innovation comes from. It comes from our higher educational system and from the scientists and entrepreneurs it trains. Continued innovation will depend on our ability to remain the world’s leader in higher education and academic research. Scholarship must therefore be amply funded and American students must have access to the best thinking from around the world. To achieve this, we must continue to attract top foreign talent to our academically free, open, internationalized campuses and we need a visa regime that allows the best of them to stay in the United States as citizens and build their careers here. We shouldn’t do this to be nice—it’s a matter of national security.

The NSS also notes that we should not “open America’s labor market to the world in the name of finding “global talent” that undercuts American workers. In our every principle and action, America and Americans must always come first.”^{ix}

In innovation, talent and funding come first; innovation is blind to nationality. It is true that, if Indian, Chinese, Saudi, and Nigerian students were taking the places of qualified Americans in top doctoral programs in particle physics, material science, and biotechnology, we might admit fewer of them, but that’s a problem we don’t have.

The problem we do have is that fewer foreign students are coming to America. The Institute for International Education reports that, in the 2025/26 academic year, new enrollments for international students in American colleges and universities decreased by 17%. If you're inclined to say, "Good Riddance," recall that, since 1901, 148 foreign-born people have won Nobel prizes for the United States. That's 34% of all U.S. prizes. Immigrants account for 40% of Nobels won by Americans in chemistry, medicine and physics since 2000.^x Many other winners have been second and third-generation U.S. citizens.

To be clear, American suspicions over CCP interference, influence, and intellectual property theft on American campuses are not only reasonable, but essential. Campus openness and internationalization *do* constitute a vulnerability. Everything we know about the motives and methods of the CCP gives cause to think they will try to exploit it.

But the evidence of actual harm done to American security through academia, to date, is thin. As mentioned above, we haven't convicted any university persons of conducting espionage for China on an American campus. This should temper our alarm about the extent of our vulnerabilities and should remind us that cooperation between academia and Washington has already succeeded. Our task going forward is not to make universities iron clad against any imaginable kind of foreign influence; it is to weigh the *demonstrated harms done to American security through academic channels* against the tremendous benefits we have gained through attracting the world's most talented to people to American soil. Failing to make this comparison will weaken American innovation and decrease our security.

Exaggerating Foreign Influence on Campuses Distracts From the Real Challenges

We are concerned about malign foreign influence on campuses primarily because we need a strong innovation system to succeed in our competition with China. Technological leadership is understood, in Beijing and Washington, to lie at the heart of our strategic, economic, and soft power rivalries. Our fear of losing ground against China is growing, as it should be. China now leads the world in trade, manufacturing, lending, middle class consumers, STEM graduates, critical minerals, medical precursors, shipbuilding, green tech, automation, steel, aluminum, 5G, biotech, and pharmaceuticals, to name only a few of the worrisome "China firsts." China is also neck-and-neck with the U.S. in development of AI, quantum technologies, and nanotechnology.

There is no evidence that China made this progress primarily because it stole intellectual property from U.S. universities and corporations. Yes, it stole a lot and it continues to steal, but that is far from the whole story. China has also planned, saved, invested, studied the experience of other countries, built universities and equipment that may drive the next age of discovery, and invented on its own. And, yes, China has used protectionism, mercantilism, civil-military fusion, and academic and social systems instrumentalized by the CCP to build state power. But China also has a vast, diligent, and extremely hungry population that sees education, especially in the sciences,

as the key to personal as well as national success, and they are early adopters of new tech. The United States cannot match China's scale because our population is smaller. We cannot match its speed because Chinese corporations are lightly regulated, often heavily subsidized, and are integrated and protected by the CCP.

China has become the world's industrial powerhouse for a host of reasons, nefarious and admirable. Our challenge is to contend with their power through the most effective means possible. Name-calling isn't one of them. Neither is asking our already highly vigilant universities to jump through ever smaller and higher hoops in the form of onerous and unnecessary disclosure requirements.

Our best strategy is to strengthen and protect the innovation system we have through re-investment in education and research. Cutting or flat funding federal research agencies and cancelling grants to U.S. universities will weaken us. According to a recent analysis by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, China's annual increase of R&D spending averaged 14 percent over the last decade, while the U.S. annual average increase was only 3.7 percent. As a result, the United States' share of global R&D has declined to 29 percent while China's share has increased to 28 percent. The U.S. will lose its technological leadership for good if these trends continue.

If our concern is for American security, Chinese Students and Scholars Associations or collaborative Sino-U.S. research on agriculture or cancer cures shouldn't keep us up at night. The joint focus of government and higher education should be on countering, for example, China's cyber attacks, its nuclear buildup, its efforts to dominate the Western Pacific and shape global order, and its ship-building. Washington became alarmed about Huawei and the Belt and Road Initiative at around the same time it started to worry about Confucius Institutes. We still don't have companies that can compete with Huawei or lending and construction programs that are as attractive to the Global South as BRI, but the Confucius Institutes are gone. Are our priorities in order, or did we get mired in minor issues because it's so difficult to face up to the great ones?

The Study of China

While colleges and universities do contribute to national security, that is not their mission; their mission is to create knowledge through research and transmit it through teaching. Here, too, the academy can help advance national goals. By conducting research on China, teaching the Chinese language, and promoting study of China across the disciplines, colleges enhance American competitiveness by fostering knowledge of our chief competitor. The same can be said for the study of other countries of concern. The formula is simple: Americans cannot form effective strategies to counter adversaries unless we understand the histories, cultures, worldviews, and ambitions of countries of concern. We cannot achieve that level of understanding without fluency and literacy in the languages of these countries. Providing that training is the job of American colleges and universities

That is why, “between 1957 and 1961, the number of ‘emergency’ Russian language courses at schools skyrocketed from only ten to 600.”^{xi} During the first cold war, the expansion of U.S. Soviet studies “was funded by government and foundation grants, and took the form of research centers, graduate programs, research grants, and journals. By 1950, the first wave of new scholars were completing their doctorates and launching their careers.”^{xii} 44,500 American university students were enrolled in Russian language courses in 1990.^{xiii} Some studied in Russia itself.

If members of Congress wish to prepare Americans to compete with China, they might learn from this history and increase funding for critical language studies on American campuses. They might encourage American students to study in Mainland China in order to understand how our adversaries think and to form relationships that may one day reduce adversity.

There is scant danger that pursuing China studies will cause our students to switch sides. American Mandarin speakers with long experience in China are among our most knowledgeable and effective critics of the PRC. Professor Perry Link, who co-edited the Tiananmen papers, Matthew Pottinger, who served as deputy national security advisor in the first Trump administration, and Liza Tobin, who worked as a China director in the National Security Council during the Trump and Biden administrations all lived in China for extended periods and speak the language well.

It would be a grave error if, in our attempts to rid American campuses of whatever malign Chinese influence remains, we demonize and destroy humanities and social science courses related to China, study abroad centers, and joint programs, including programs in China, that enable American students to live, form friendships, and lock horns with Chinese peers. Such curricula serve the national interest.

As the president of the American Mandarin Society put it recently, “If you want to be continually surprised by developments like DeepSeek, by all means, neglect the study of China.”

ⁱ chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/article/magic_weapons.pdf

ⁱⁱ <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/preliminary-study-prc-political-influence-and-interference-activities-american-higher>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.hoover.org/research/chinas-influence-american-interests-promoting-constructive-vigilance>

^{iv} <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/audio/great-wall-steel-chinas-global-campaign-against-uyghurs>

^v <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/book/hearts-minds-votes-contracts-chinas-state-media-latin-america>

^{vi} chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://nap.nationalacademies.org/resource/27065/HLs_Foreign-Funded%20Institutes_FINAL.pdf

^{vii} <https://spaceref.com/status-report/ostp-clear-rules-for-research-security-and-researcher-responsibility/>

^{viii} chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf

^{ix} chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf

^x <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stuartanderson/2023/10/05/immigrant-nobel-prize-winners-continue-to-impress/>

^{xi} <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/educating-cold-warriors#:~:text=Propagation%20of%20Russian%20area%20studies,conflict%20of%20ideologies%20in%20general.>

^{xii} <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/looking-back-the-origins-soviet-studies>

^{xiii} <https://www.the74million.org/article/fewer-u-s-college-students-are-studying-a-foreign-language-%E2%88%92-and-that-spells-trouble-for-national-security/#:~:text=Role%20of%20geopolitics&text=Enrollments%20in%20Russian%20peaked%20at,2009%20at%20just%20under%2035%2C000.>