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CHINA'S INFLUENCE IN U.S. HIGHER EDUCATION

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China's goals as they relate to U.S. education

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U.S. HIGHER ED AS CHINA'S REACH SCHOOL

American universities are leading global centers of scientific research and education — producing remarkable insights and cutting-edge technologies with enviable consistency and prominence. Their stature and productivity is reinforced by their attractiveness for collaboration among scholars around the world. The People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC or China), while not alone, has sought to take advantage of the openness of this national resource to advance its own economy, scientific achievement, military prowess, and international standing, often through improper means.

CHINA'S MULTIPLE MAJORS

- **Fuel global economic and technological primacy.** China needs to cultivate a massive base of elite scientists and engineers to support initiatives like Made in China 2025,¹ becoming the "AI global innovation center"² by 2030, and China Standards 2035 — China's time-line to equal and then dominate other advanced economies.³
- **Expedite military advancement.** China's Military-Civil Fusion initiative weaponizes its economic success, and its economic success is rooted in free universities in the U.S., Europe and Five Eyes countries.⁴
- **Influence the global conversation about China.** Suppressing criticism of China at U.S. and other⁵ universities has always been a goal.⁶ The PRC's newfound buying power⁷ brings that goal within reach,⁸ as schools are reluctant to insult their "biggest customer."
- **Manage PRC students abroad.** The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) wants its students abroad to remain loyal⁹ so they can serve the motherland while still abroad or after returning home;¹⁰ dissent from those students must be identified and suppressed.

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HOW CHINA HOPES TO GRADUATE

- **Enroll students in foreign universities.** While China's own universities are rapidly improving and enroll over 20 million students, 680,000¹¹ PRC students were enrolled abroad in 2018 (370,000 in the U.S.),¹² and 7% were sponsored by the PRC government.¹³
- **Leverage enrollment with university administrations.** Tuition from Chinese students has become economically critical¹⁴ to some U.S. and many Five Eyes universities.¹⁵ That buying power can be used to silence critics,¹⁶ promote the One China policy,¹⁷ and at times gain positions of influence in foreign universities.¹⁸
- **Use foreign labs to stay on the cutting edge of dual-use and military technology.** There are 76,000 Chinese graduate STEM researchers in U.S. universities.¹⁹ Some come from China's defense universities²⁰ and some have served in the PLA.²¹ PLA-affiliated scientists have co-authored hundreds of scientific papers with professors at U.S. universities.²² While most scholars from the PRC pose no specific economic or security risk, some scholars from China have acquired or exported sensitive technologies illegally.²³
- **Hire leading foreign scientists.** China uses state-sponsored talent plans to acquire intellectual property through senior scientists at foreign universities.²⁴ These arrangements are carefully crafted to serve China's national interests and they are not always disclosed.²⁵ Some of China's talent plans relate explicitly to China's military.²⁶
- **Cultivate soft power through academic diplomacy.** Joint degrees,²⁷ university partnerships,²⁸ student exchanges,²⁹ Confucius Institutes,³⁰ and Confucius Classrooms each contribute to China's global soft power outreach.³¹
- **Surveil Chinese students abroad and quickly respond to dissent.** Ideological management through surveillance of PRC students in foreign universities has been carried out by Chinese Students and Scholars Associations³² and, less often, student branches of the CCP.³³ Some students have been arrested³⁴ or placed in internment facilities upon their return to China;³⁵ authorities have threatened family members of students who are still abroad.³⁶

» KEY ITEMS TO WATCH

ACTION FROM U.S. UNIVERSITIES

- Whether universities will implement proposed R&D security best practices³⁷ pursuant to the recent National Security Presidential Memorandum;³⁸ whether they will beef up their cybersecurity, currently the weakest of any U.S. economic sector;³⁹ and whether more universities will join Oxford,⁴⁰ Princeton,⁴¹ and others in protecting students from the extraterritorial reach of the Hong Kong National Security Law.⁴²

ACTION FROM DOD

- Whether DOD-led initiatives to protect its funded research and researchers pursuant to 2019 NDAA Sec. 1286 will counter China's influence at research universities.⁴³

RESEARCHER CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

- Whether major U.S. R&D grant-making agencies⁴⁴ will focus on researcher conflict of interest disclosure as recommended by GAO.⁴⁵

FOREIGN MONEY REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

- Whether leading university groups will succeed in paring back⁴⁶ current foreign contract and gift disclosure requirements under Higher Education Act (HEA) Sec. 117.⁴⁷

LEGISLATIVE ACTION

- Whether Congress will modify university disclosure requirements under HEA 117, put more pressure on Confucius Institutes,⁴⁸ or take counter-measures against China's talent acquisition plans.⁴⁹

TAIWAN ENGAGEMENT

- Whether a new U.S.-Taiwan MOU⁵⁰ to increase academic collaboration and engagement will begin to displace the remaining Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms.⁵¹

SUGGESTIONS FOR ADDITIONAL READING

- **Overseas Students and Scholars in China's Drive for Innovation.**⁵² This 2020 U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission report examines Beijing's programs designed to exploit the expertise of Chinese students and scholars in foreign universities.
- **No Strings Attached? Tracing Foreign Funding in U.S. Higher Education.**⁵³ This 2020 U.S. Department of Education report reviews findings from a series of investigations involving elite U.S. universities receiving previously-undisclosed funds from Qatar, China, Saudia Arabia and Russia.
- **Picking Flowers, Making Honey: The Chinese military's collaboration with foreign universities.**⁵⁴ This 2018 white paper from Australia analyzes hundreds of U.S., Five Eyes and European university researchers' peer-reviewed publications with scientists from China's PLA-affiliated universities.
- **Compromising the Knowledge Economy: Authoritarian Challenges to Independent Intellectual Inquiry.**⁵⁵ This short 2020 white paper reviews the problem of PRC interference in free speech and inquiry at universities in the U.S. and abroad.
- **Towards Sustainable Europe-China Collaboration in Higher Education and Research.**⁵⁶ This 2020 white paper from the Netherlands comprehensively reviews the PRC's aspirations and activities and catalogs responses from many nations to date.

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