



China Policy in Flux



By Stephen G. Pelletier

From trade tariffs to restrictions on immigration, government policies may affect the flow of Chinese students and scholars to U.S. colleges and universities. How should AASCU institutions react?

Tariffs imposed as part of the escalating trade war between China and the United States mean that American consumers will likely pay more for goods such as Chinese-made furniture and appliances. But for colleges and universities, rising tensions between Washington and Beijing might have deeper consequences than just higher prices for dorm-room desks. The Trump administration's evident animosity toward China could reduce the flow of Chinese students and scholars to this country. Press reports indicate that in a spring meeting at the Oval Office, Stephen Miller, an immigration hardliner and advisor to the president, argued for a complete ban on Chinese student visas, alleged to hurt elite institutions that have been critical of the administration. The proposal was rejected when the U.S. ambassador to China, Terry Branstad, opposed it by pointing to how widespread Chinese student enrollment is at institutions across the country.

That rejection cannot be construed as a broad change in policy. This past March, it was reported that the White House was considering including visa restrictions on Chinese citizens in planned tariff packages. As described in *Inside Higher Ed*, the restrictions were seen as a means "to punish China for allegedly violating American intellectual property laws and pressuring U.S. companies to transfer technology." The Trump administration ended up not bundling the visa restrictions with the tariffs, but in June it provided new guidance to U.S. consular officers, aimed at Chinese students coming to the United States for graduate programs in certain key fields such as aviation, advanced manufacturing and robotics—areas that are seen as ripe for theft of intellectual property from the United States. Reversing a 2014 policy implemented during

the Obama administration, the new guidance suggested shortening the length of visas for these graduate students from five-year to one-year renewal visas, reverting back to the pre-2014 agreement to offer five-year visas for students moving in either direction.

Also in June, a national counterintelligence official testified before Congress that "we are particularly concerned about foreign academics and researchers in advanced programs at U.S. academic institutions ... who have access to, and

"rightly or wrongly, most observers attribute the trade dispute to President Trump's personal worldview," Nassirian says. But at the same time, he adds, "concern about Chinese students and particularly graduate students appears to be deeply rooted within the national security and counterintelligence community." Accordingly, Nassirian warns that government restrictions on Chinese students is not a passing phase that might be seen as merely reflecting a temporary aberration from Republican orthodoxy on free trade. Rather, he suggests, deep-set fears within the government about potential Chinese industrial espionage are real, as evidenced by a recent news story that reported the insertion of hardware "backdoors" by a unit of China's People's Liberation Army on secure motherboards manufactured in China and used by the Department of Defense, the CIA, and some 30 U.S. corporations. Such national security worries could have lasting impact on the ability of colleges and universities to host students and scholars from China.

Diversity, Dollars and Brainpower

Regardless of what factors drive them, the administration's tightening of visa access for students from China comes in an era when international students have growing importance for U.S. colleges and universities. This is partly because of the tuition dollars international students pay and their spending in local communities, a combined total that NAFSA: Association of International Educators estimated at \$36.9 billion in 2017. Students from abroad also bring an important diversity of perspectives to campuses and can supply needed brainpower in subject areas where U.S. students may not be as numerous or accomplished.

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are seeking to acquire, sensitive information and technology." President Trump cast that concern more bluntly at a dinner for CEOs in August. *Politico* reported that at a point during the dinner, Trump appeared to be referring to China when he asserted that "almost every student that comes over to this country [from that country] is a spy."

What's at play here are two related but separate political narratives, suggests Barmak Nassirian, director of federal relations and policy analysis at AASCU. One side of the coin is that

Limits on Chinese student visas might have a particularly significant impact, in that China is currently the leading exporter of students and scholars to the United States. Chinese students in the United States exceeded 350,000 in 2016-17, according to data from the Institute of International Education's (IIE) annual *Open Doors* survey. That figure, up from more than 328,000 the previous year, represents almost a third (32.5 percent) of all international students in U.S. higher education. Indian students, the second-largest cohort, were 17.5 percent, or just over 186,000 of total international students, which overall exceeded 1 million students in 2016-17. China is also the leading "country of origin" for international scholars on U.S. campuses, IIE data show, with more than 45,000 scholars from China, or a third of total visiting scholars teaching or doing research at U.S. colleges and universities in 2016-17.

Legislative Leverage

The cloud over Chinese students and scholars stretches to also include Confucius Institutes, campus-based organizations sponsored by the Chinese government to promote Chinese language and culture, to support the teaching of Chinese on campus and in local schools, and to facilitate cultural exchange. More than 100 U.S. colleges and universities—including about 30 AACSB institutions—host these centers (as do hundreds of universities in Europe, Latin America, the Middle East and Asia). Critics, however, see these institutes as threats to national security.

Reflecting that sentiment, Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas) and others inserted language into the John McCain 2019 Defense Authorization Act, signed into law in August, that pointedly bans U.S. universities from using Pentagon resources to support their Confucius Institutes. "Confucius Institutes are a key way the regime infiltrates American higher education to silence criticism and sanitize education about China," Cruz told *The Washington Post*. "American taxpayer dollars should not be subsidizing their propaganda."

In February, Florida Sen. Marco Rubio asked four Florida institutions to shutter their Confucius Institutes. Whether as a direct response to that letter or not, the University of West Florida and the University of North Florida announced plans to close their Confucius Institutes. After receiving a similar letter from Congressional representatives in Texas, Texas A&M announced plans to close Confucius Institutes at its flagship campus and at its branch in Prairie View, Texas.

What We Are Seeing

William I. Brustein, vice president for global strategies and international affairs at West Virginia University and an expert on



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international strategy in higher education, says the current climate is reminiscent to some extent of "what we saw during the late '40s and early '50s during the McCarthy period, when China was being portrayed as not only an adversary, but with the fear that Chinese nationals were lurking in the corners of our universities and in our towns and villages and cities and were here to steal our technology or to spy on what's being done across the nation." Today, he says, "we see that with respect to some of the rhetoric around the Confucius Institutes and with respect to looking at giving H-1B visas to Chinese scholars who have spent years studying here. It really

has had a deleterious effect, there's no question about it."

With 30 years of experience as a senior member of the staff at IIE, Peggy Blumenthal offers some further context on this complicated set of issues. "If you go back decades, there have always been worries about the U.S.-China academic relationship by some people," she says. Confucius Institutes, she notes, have faced opposition on some campuses since that program began in 2004.

Blumenthal, who currently serves as senior counselor at IIE, says that recently "there certainly has been a heightening of scrutiny, both of Chinese students and scholars in the United States and of the role of the Chinese government." Some of the scrutiny, she says,

"has been very carefully documented by researchers and is I think quite appropriate." On the other hand, she is quick to add that some of the scrutiny is entirely political—and unfortunate. "What we don't really need is targeting innocent foreign students by using a very broad brush to suggest that all of them are spies," Blumenthal says. "That's entirely inappropriate."

An extensive recent research study from the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars found evidence that some Chinese diplomats in the United States "have infringed on the academic freedom of American university faculty, students, administrators, and staff." Their methods of interference include challenging universities about invited speakers and events and "pressuring and/or offering inducements to faculty," according to the report. Another evident strategy: retaliating against certain American universities that cooperate with Chinese institutions.

Some Chinese students have demanded content they deem sensitive removed from campus spaces, called for faculty members to change their language or teaching methods, heckled speakers who criticize China, and pressured universities to cancel certain events, the report also found. Moreover, some Chinese students have been found to be "probing

faculty for information in a manner” or acted in ways that intimidated members of campus communities, the report stated. However, such infractions are likely conducted by only a relative few of the Chinese students in the United States, noted the study’s author, Anastasya Lloyd-Damnjanovic.

Effects on Campus

It’s too early to know definitively how White House trade and visa policies might ultimately affect the flow of Chinese students and scholars to this country. And such trends need to be viewed in the context of other factors, such as immigration policies that make it harder for students from Muslim countries to come to the United States. Preliminary data from IIE about Fall 2017 show a 6.9 percent decline in international students enrolling for the first time at a U.S. institution, mirroring a trend first seen in Fall 2016. For Fall 2017, 45 percent of the 522 institutions surveyed reported a drop in new international student numbers, while 31 percent saw an increase and 24 percent reported stable enrollment. A potentially telling finding from that survey is that compared to Fall 2016, more institutions said Fall 2017 declines in new enrollments could be attributed to problems with visa delays and denials and the U.S. social and political climate. (Another factor: the sticker price for U.S. higher education.)

Campus-based experts say Chinese students are very much aware of these issues affecting their ability to study in the United States. “Chinese students in the U.S. basically feel caught between two walls,” says Hans de Wit, director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College. “On the one hand, there is this increasing pressure from the Chinese side that is worried about the critical thinking that the Chinese students develop when they are in the United States. Then, they also feel pressured on the American side by the [perceived perception] that ‘all Chinese students are spies.’ So they are caught in between.”

Brustein, who travels often to China, finds that Chinese students are increasingly talking about what kind of welcome they might find if they travel to study in the United States. “They ask about that,” he says. “Will America

be friendly to me; will people be hostile to me when I’m outside the university and walking in the town or buying a Starbucks? Those kinds of questions have been asked over many years, but what’s new is there’s been more of an emphasis on the anti-foreign climate that seems to be taking hold.” Concerns about how U.S. policy might affect the flow of Chinese students and scholars have risen to become a focus of conversations among administrators and faculty at West Virginia University, Brustein says—as no doubt they have on many other campuses.

Government agencies, meanwhile, seem disinclined to assuage those concerns. At a recent presentation on one university campus, for example, agents from an FBI field office characterized China as an adversary and urged scrutiny of official Chinese influence on campus through entities such as Confucius Institutes as well as monitoring of certain students, particularly Chinese graduate students in STEM disciplines.

Looking Ahead

While the current political climate challenges the ability of U.S. institutions to host Chinese students and scholars, there are reasons to be optimistic that such exchanges will

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continue and even expand in the future. One critical reason for that optimism goes to the inherent value of education in U.S. colleges and universities. Many parents in China today have the means to send their children to any college in world, Blumenthal says, but as they consider their options they “look around the world and at U.S. higher education and find it still to be the gold standard.” Similarly, she suggests that stepping back to look at the big picture reveals that even though a few Confucius Institutes have closed, hundreds still remain open around the world, “doing good work and actually helping to improve understanding of China and teaching Chinese language.”

Closer to home, another sign of strength is the ongoing growth of AASCU’s own work to build relationships between AASCU institutions and higher education institutions in China. Through that program, for example, about 700 Chinese undergraduate and graduate students are enrolled today in 121 programs at 35 AASCU institutions, bringing revenue to those institutions that is estimated at more than \$42 million over the next two years. “This is probably one of the best years we’ve had programmatically for the work that we’re doing,” says Arlene Jackson, associate vice president for global initiatives at AASCU.

Pendulum Swings

As U.S. policy about China swings back and forth, the best strategy for universities might be to step back, keep the relevant issues in perspective, and perhaps use the bully pulpit of higher education to shed light on the issues that threaten the flow of Chinese students and scholars to this country. Hans de Wit urges institutional leaders to “listen carefully to the [Chinese] students themselves” and to “understand their concerns and worries and speak about that.”

“I think it’s very important to continue sending out the message [to international students] that you are welcome here,” Blumenthal says. “I think we need to step up our game on that. Colleges and university presidents who are traveling in Asia should keep showing up in China and making clear that, despite rhetoric that may be in the media,

Chinese students and scholars in fact are still very welcome and very valued for the diverse perspective they bring to campus.”

U.S. institutions do all they can to help international students feel welcome and part of the campus community, Blumenthal says. “If students are feeling intimidated either from American rhetoric or from [Chinese] government rhetoric, the school needs to be supportive of academic freedom in all directions,” she says. Institutions can also encourage Chinese students in the United States to send messages home about their positive experiences on U.S. campuses.

Institutions “need a nuanced approach” that balances being responsive to national security concerns while also upholding U.S. higher education’s hallmark tradition of welcoming students from all over the world, Brustein says, and U.S. colleges and universities can play a unique role. “Let’s not forget our mission, and that is to open our arms to debate and free thought and to welcoming people from all around the world who bring in fresh perspectives, enrich our economy and really help make this country the leader that it is,” he says.

“One thing I think that those of us who have been in higher education for many years realize is that the pendulum swings back and forth in terms of policy and how those policies will affect the programs that we continue to

operate on our campuses,” Jackson says. “Moving forward, we must be diligent in making sure that the United States is perceived as a welcoming country and that we create opportunities for international students on our campus, to immerse them in social as well as academic programs. And all the while still providing opportunities for our American students.” **P**

Based in Rockville, Md., Stephen G. Pelletier writes frequently about higher education.

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**—PEGGY BLUMENTHAL, SENIOR STAFF MEMBER,
INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION**