

ENGAGEMENT WITH CHINA: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AMERICAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Introduction

American universities* historically have approached the People's Republic of China (hereinafter, "China" or the "PRC") from a purely academic perspective. As China becomes a more active and powerful participant on the global stage, university leaders now often find that their institutional strategies and operations are increasingly reliant on relationships with Chinese institutions and individuals. With growing academic exchange between the United States and China, universities are in the middle of what is arguably the most important and complex bilateral relationship in the world today. As a result, today's leaders of higher education increasingly need to understand how China operates – socially, politically, and legally – and what impact this can have on their institutions.

For American universities, cooperation with China offers the chance to enhance university life through promoting scientific and intellectual collaboration, increasing the diversity of their faculty and students, boosting enrollment and tuition revenue, and contributing to university development efforts via a newly discovered population of Chinese alumni and other giving. For all of these reasons, many universities have considered or established China-based centers, programs, or partnerships, and have pursued efforts that substantially increase Chinese student enrollment on U.S. campuses. At the same time, however, engagement with China presents significant challenges – ranging from intellectual property protection to protection of academic freedom to healthy integration of a diverse student body – that are receiving growing attention at the national level.

University leaders feel an understandable pressure to succeed in new ventures that involve China. Most, however, have relatively limited experience with and understanding of China in their administrative ranks. Although most campuses have real and deep faculty expertise on China, universities often do not make the important link between faculty China experts and the administrative personnel responsible for articulating and executing the institution's broader strategic vision. This disconnect runs a range of risks, from simple policy errors, to a failure to anticipate the effects of major university decisions, to compromising core values of academic freedom and open inquiry.

We provide the attached report in an effort to address constructively the challenges that university leaders face in designing and implementing effective strategies and policies for engagement with China. The report was written in response to concerns raised at a December 2018 meeting between a group of 20 fellows of the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations' (NCUSCR) Public Intellectuals Program (PIP) and AAU President, Dr. Mary Sue Coleman.

The National Committee on U.S.-China Relations (NCUSCR) has facilitated exchange and understanding between the United States and China since the days of ping-pong diplomacy; its Public Intellectuals Program (PIP) provides training to a highly select group of 120 social sciences, humanities, and law faculty (all American citizens or green card-holders), with the goal of bringing academic expertise into public conversations about China. This report draws on an online survey completed by 27 (of the then 100) PIP fellows as well as informal communications from additional members of the PIP group – all China scholars who teach at leading research and liberal arts institutions in social sciences, humanities, and law. These academics are Chinese speakers, regularly navigate political and bureaucratic constraints to pursue research in China, collaborate and conduct exchanges with Chinese

** While the term "university" is used as shorthand throughout this report, the same concerns hold for colleges as well.*

educational partners, and teach Chinese students (meaning, herein, international students from mainland China) in American classrooms. We believe that the issues and recommendations presented below can leverage that expertise to help university leadership develop and improve their strategies for engagement with China.

Respondents highlighted five major areas of concern for university engagement with China: 1) increasing restrictions on and obstacles to conducting research in China; 2) inadequate protection of core academic principles in university engagement with China; 3) insufficient coordination within universities of various China initiatives, and insufficient integration of faculty who understand China into those efforts; 4) the potential for political tensions to negatively affect the campus climate; and 5) the necessity of effectively integrating increased numbers of Chinese students into campus life and culture. These five issues address a broader range of concerns including possible infringements on freedom of speech in the classroom; management of Chinese institutions such as Confucius Institutes or Chinese Student and Scholars Associations on campus; increased enrollment of Chinese undergraduates and corresponding interest from development offices in alumni giving potential; publication censorship; and recent changes in the domestic political climate in both countries that affect the bilateral relationship between the U.S. and Chinese governments.

We wish to note that some of the issues that we highlight – such as the need to better coordinate campus China initiatives – are shared by faculty and departments in the hard sciences. In other cases, those disciplines face issues (such as technology transfer and intellectual property protection) that are less central to our work, and about which we offer relatively little advice. We hope that a team of scientists, clinicians, and engineers with similar China expertise might be able to generate a parallel report summarizing major issues and challenges for STEM faculty.

Below, we provide more detail on the five highlighted areas of concern and then conclude with a set of recommendations. We hope these recommendations are helpful to American colleges and universities as they consider the policies and processes that are necessary for fostering their institution's successful engagement with China vis-à-vis their faculty, students and alumni. We would be happy to follow up on any outstanding questions.

Sincerely,

Sara Friedman
Professor, Anthropology
Indiana University

Carl Minzner
Professor, Law
Fordham Law School

Sheena Chestnut Greitens
Assistant Professor, Political Science
University of Missouri

Elanah Uretsky
Visiting Assistant Professor, Anthropology
Brandeis University

ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

I. Growing Restrictions on Conducting Research in China

Social science research in China is becoming increasingly difficult.¹ The scope of topics that can be researched is shrinking rapidly; many topics are deemed off-limits because of actual or perceived political sensitivity. Growing obstacles to free and open inquiry limit research productivity and potentially affect the safety of research scholars, their collaborators, and sometimes their family members. Our group identified three main areas of concern with regard to this topic: research access, career advancement, and personal and data security.

Respondents repeatedly described difficulty with access to China itself or to materials needed for their research: this included visa denials and visa processing uncertainty; difficulty establishing and maintaining research partnerships with colleagues and institutions in China (required to legally conduct most research in the PRC); and denial of access to archives or archival materials. Both junior and senior scholars are concerned with how restricted access may affect their research productivity, their ability to present and publish research, and their chances for tenure and promotion.

Respondents expressed concern about their own personal security and/or that of their interlocutors based in China: institutional hosts, co-authors, archivists and librarians, research assistants, research informants, etc., as well as risks to family members still in China if a U.S.-based scholar pursues research that is deemed too sensitive by those in positions of political authority. The following comment is from a U.S.-based Chinese-born academic but the sentiments were echoed by non-native Chinese as well:

“I’m cautious of Chinese government censorship that could not only undermine my academic freedom but also hurt my family back in China. Over time I have completely shunned Chinese media, and avoided giving talks on sensitive topics in Chinese language or publishing in Chinese. I also rarely tweet in Chinese or actively broadcast my research to Chinese colleagues . . . There is an obvious trade-off between maintaining the completeness of my academic view and augmenting my academic influence in China.”

Respondents also expressed concern that requirements from IRBs unfamiliar with authoritarian political environments, such as documentation of informed consent, could actually increase the risks faced by research collaborators and informants in China. The vulnerability of computers and phones that connect to the Internet in China is also a major concern for privacy protection and data security.

II. Need to Embed Core Academic Principles in Engagement with China

Academic freedom lies at the core of university education in the United States. Increasingly, universities are grappling with how to protect this freedom effectively. In the context of a changing climate in China, as well as university efforts to increase interaction with China, infringements of academic freedom have become a significant concern on university campuses. Our respondents emphasized the following examples: calls on the part of the Chinese government to censor the release of journals published outside China that include articles on sensitive topics such as Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan; agreements with Chinese university partners that do not adhere to the same principles of academic freedom and transparency that are valued by American universities; Confucius Institutes playing an overly broad role

¹ For more information on researchers’ experiences, see Sheena Chestnut Greitens and Rory Truex, “Repressive Experiences Among China Scholars: New Evidence from Survey Data,” *The China Quarterly* (forthcoming 2019).

in shaping campus programming;² and potential conflicts of interest resulting from university reliance on expanded financial resource flows from Chinese students and alumni. Universities need to be aware of which choices and issues related to China could involve challenges to academic freedom, and craft coordinated and specific policies to ensure that these freedoms are protected.

III. Inadequate Coordination of Campus China Initiatives and Insufficient Integration of China Expertise

Many respondents raised concern that faculty with deep knowledge about China, extended in-country experience, and Chinese language skills are insufficiently consulted about plans for major institutional engagement in or with the PRC. Multiple respondents provided feedback to the following effect: “China studies scholars on campus are almost completely out-of-the-loop in regard to campus policies and initiatives relating to China.” As a result, universities lose the opportunity to apply in-house expertise from faculty who can help identify China-specific risks and provide advice on how to structure engagement in ways that are safe, ethical, and consistent with university values.

When coupled with limited experience with or understanding of the Chinese political system among many campus administrators, this disconnect raises the possibility that administrators could make decisions that generate risks or secondary effects on other parts of the university, without being fully aware of or able to weigh the consequences. For example, recruitment efforts aimed at increasing revenue from China (i.e., by expanding the full fee-paying cohort of international students) have sometimes been conducted without adequate planning for associated needs, such as expanded student services tailored to a specific population. Lack of broad consultation with faculty who have research expertise in China can also raise risks that discrete interests (a wealthy donor, a specific alumnus/a, a particular Chinese partner) may wield excessive influence in determining the school’s engagement with China, with deleterious effects on the core missions of the university, or that institutional partnerships may be created without sufficient contractual protection for the university or its core missions.

IV. Potential Risks to Campus Climate

Our survey respondents highlighted two risks to campus climate: the risk that CCP influence over students, faculty, or staff could lead to curtailed freedom of speech in American classrooms without the knowledge of university administrators, and the risk that fears of that kind of political interference in higher education could lead to unfair stigmatization of individual Chinese students or faculty.

Recent reports and Congressional hearings have emphasized risk of CCP influence on campus, though mostly in terms of campus programming; our respondents highlighted a less visible but equally serious form of potential impact: classroom teaching. One respondent remarked: “Anecdotes suggest that some Chinese students, either voluntarily or paid by the Chinese embassy or consulates, watch fellow students or even faculty speeches in class and elsewhere on campus, and report back to the Chinese government.” Suppression of freedom of speech, and the kind of fear this suppression can create in Chinese students studying in the United States, are at the core of academic integrity, the open exchange of ideas, and the ability of international students to participate fully in American intellectual life during their course of study. Universities should monitor these risks and be vigilant about developing mechanisms to protect all of their students, including those from the PRC, from this kind of interference whenever possible.

² Note that our survey showed that the extent and type of Confucius Institute involvement in university internal and external affairs varies widely by institution.

Heightened public attention to these concerns can also, however, create a climate in which individual Chinese students and visiting scholars, as well as Chinese-American scholars, encounter discrimination and hostility that stifles their ability to participate freely and equally in campus life. Students and faculty who are citizens of the PRC, after all, are not able to express objections to their government's policies freely, nor can they advocate to change them without risking severe consequences. University administrators should be aware of the risks of anti-China sentiment: alienating Chinese students and exacerbating nationalism among them; chilling effects on scholarly exchange if U.S. academic institutions are perceived as discriminatory or hostile; and heightened vulnerability of Chinese-American and PRC-national scholars in the United States, many of whom have family who remain in China. As bipartisan rhetoric in the United States grows increasingly tough on the PRC government, we ask that universities – insofar as it is reasonable – separate individual students and scholars from the policy positions of their government.

We understand that in some cases, there are real national security concerns around engagement with China. From the standpoint of the social sciences, however, compliance with U.S. national security concerns should not foreclose efforts to engage with individuals from the PRC. Indeed, social science scholarship has shown that there are valid and compelling national security reasons to keep carefully crafted and responsible forms of dialogue and discussion open, especially in times of heightened political tension.

V. Effective Integration of Chinese Students into Campus Life

International students comprise a growing proportion of U.S. university campus populations, with a total of roughly one million in the United States in AY 2017-2018. Students from mainland China represented 10 percent of all international students in 2000; that proportion has rapidly increased to 23.3 percent (in 2010) and then to 33.2 percent (in AY 2017-2018), according to IIE's Open Doors annual survey of U.S. campuses. Moreover, unlike a generation ago, American higher education has seen a sharp rise in international *undergraduates*, especially self-funded students from China, a trend driven both by steady demand from foreign students and a desire by U.S. schools – private and public alike – to tap foreign students as a revenue source.

The introduction of a growing student population from a country with wholly different educational, legal, and social practices has introduced a host of new challenges onto U.S. campuses and exacerbated pre-existing ones, including *language barriers* (many international students from mainland China arrive on campus ill-prepared to conduct academic work in English); *social isolation* (on campuses with large populations, Chinese students often insulate themselves within their own communities); *inadequate career placement services* (offices built to meet the needs of American students, rather than those of international students); and *inadequate emphasis on academic integrity and intellectual exchange* (students are often unfamiliar with American higher education standards of academic integrity, leaving them exposed to unexpected academic penalties). These problems occur with many international student populations, but the recent large increases in Chinese student populations specifically mean that universities may usefully concentrate initial efforts to address these issues there.

Discontent over these issues can exacerbate related issues on campus: tensions surrounding classroom discussions or campus events on China-related subjects that present a less-than-positive view of the PRC; the emerging role of mainland Chinese student associations as a parallel but relatively closed source of support and information, leaving some Chinese students isolated from broader campus life; and efforts by Chinese consulates to cultivate links with such associations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Higher Education Association-Specific Recommendations

- Associations such as the American Council on Education, Association of American Universities, Association of Public and Land Grant Universities, and their sister organizations should develop guidelines for member universities to engage China in productive ways that promote academic exchange, and are also fully compatible with the core values of intellectual freedom that govern U.S. universities. This could include a common stance on visa denials (to American or Chinese scholars), collective engagement with publishers to minimize censorship in the China market, and standard or recommended language for institutional partnerships in China, with the aim of safeguarding academic freedoms.
- These associations should provide policy options to their members regarding their ability to use existing laws and university codes of conduct to address malicious reporting of student or faculty speech to media or foreign governments.
- These associations should create a repository of best practices and/or a mechanism by which member universities can regularly share their experiences in or with China, in order to increase information on and awareness of options for productive engagement.

University-Specific Recommendations

- Universities should map all of their China-related initiatives/activities, and then utilize the expertise of faculty with experience working in China to generate a China-focused strategy that advances and protects the priorities and mission of their institution.
- Universities contemplating activities in China should establish an advisory board of faculty and administrators with experience working in China to help conceive ideas and set parameters; to conduct periodic reviews of their strategy and its component activities; and to ensure that university actions are productive, coordinated, and consistent with intellectual exchange and academic freedom. The University of Michigan offers a potential model.
- Universities should familiarize themselves with the obstacles U.S.-based scholars working on and in China commonly face, understand how these obstacles affect scholarship and research productivity, and integrate recognition of these research conditions into Tenure and Promotion (T&P) guidelines.
- Universities should consider integrating visa sponsorship by U.S. universities for PRC scholars and by partner PRC universities for U.S. scholars into existing or new MOUs for collaborative arrangements with Chinese partner institutions, and should also support faculty initiatives to invite Chinese scholars to U.S. institutions as one method of offsetting the growing difficulty of obtaining authorization for extended stays in China. Granting such access fosters productive long-term collaboration between U.S. and Chinese universities; safeguards the production of academic knowledge on China; and fosters a welcoming environment for PRC academics that allows these partnerships and methods of knowledge production to take place in an environment unconstrained by the political restrictions that apply to many university activities in China itself.

- Universities should support individual faculty and students who are denied visas for China or prevented from leaving China by, for example, having clear lines of communication with U.S. consular or other officials who are empowered to engage Chinese counterparts on such issues. Universities should also have clear and uniform internal policies in place for faculty, students, and administrators traveling to China to conduct research, study, attend conferences, or work on behalf of the school. Among the key areas that should be covered are guidance on what category of visas should be used. Universities should also be prepared to arrange access to legal assistance when necessary.
- Universities should think systematically about Chinese student enrollment and integration once students arrive on campus, to ensure that they are adequately supported in their participation in American university life and community. These efforts should also specifically ensure that Chinese students on American campuses are provided clear and detailed opportunities to become familiar with the values that govern university life in the United States, including free inquiry and open debate, and to understand their obligations as students to uphold those values during their time on campus.
- Universities with significant international populations, including Chinese students, should consider tailoring services and support systems for this group that will be sustained throughout a student's time at the university. These may include the following:
 - Language development programs that include writing skills;
 - Culturally-specific orientation and other programs that introduce international students to practices and concerns of American college life, including academic freedom and open exchange as well as other issues such as residence and alcohol policies, campus diversity efforts, procedures around sexual harassment or assault, and plagiarism;
 - Housing assignments that promote integration;
 - Sustained dialogue with Chinese students, coupled with on-campus programming that fosters community and addresses the evolving needs of this subset of the student population; and
 - An increase in Chinese-speaking or culturally knowledgeable staff in university offices that interact with students to assist with services such as advising, student life, career counseling, and mental health.
- Universities should carefully observe national security protocols. However, university leaders should differentiate risks across disciplines and forms of engagement; indiscriminately limiting either research in China or institutional engagement with Chinese partners and universities will unnecessarily damage knowledge production and the university's core missions. Faculty with China expertise can help assess China-specific risks and guide universities toward engagement practices that are safe, ethical, productive, and consistent with university values.
- Universities should clearly state that they do not condone or accept discrimination or profiling of Chinese faculty, students, or other members of the university. They should ensure that campus programs sufficiently stress tolerance and understanding between international and domestic students.
- Overall, universities should strive to create a sense of professional community among scholars of different disciplines, schools or colleges, administrators, peer institutions, and the policy world. Universities may want to consider establishing a forum for discussing some of the issues raised

here, or use existing fora to communicate openly about these challenges to local and national policy makers and to the campus community.