

Public Discourse and Public Policy on Foreign Interference in Higher Education

Kyle A. Long^{a*} and Carly O'Connell^b

^a*Northwestern University, USA*

^b*The George Washington University, USA*

*Corresponding author: Kyle A. Long, kyle.long@northwestern.edu.

Address: Northwestern University, IL, USA

Abstract

In recent years, news media have increased reporting about alleged foreign interference in universities worldwide. A flurry of new policies has followed. This article reviews discourse and policy on foreign interference in higher education in select countries. It identifies the alleged perpetrators and victims, the victims' concerns and responses, and the voices shaping the narrative about foreign interference. We combine the concepts of sharp power and right-wing authoritarianism to inform a discourse analysis and comparative policy analysis of a data set of 161 news articles and related media sources spanning a 30-month period of 2019-2021. Our findings highlight how government actors within the United States and Australia drive the international English-language discourse about Chinese foreign interference in a polarized media environment. We observe well-founded fears of China's exploitation of international students and research collaborations to the detriment of national security. At the same time, a resurgent worldwide authoritarian movement is also exploiting these concerns to augment long-standing assaults on higher education. Our study helps to bridge the gap between the primarily positive framing of the internationalization of higher education in scholarly discourse and the negative focus on foreign interference in higher education in the media, government, and other public discourse. It also serves as an important introduction to this phenomenon and call to action for scholars of the internationalization of higher education to conduct further research and actively engage in the broader discourse around this topic.

Keywords: authoritarianism, censorship, China Initiative, espionage, foreign influence, foreign interference, propaganda, sharp power

Introduction

Since 2016, foreign interference has become a matter of broad public concern in the United States. What started as allegations of Russian meddling in the U.S. presidential election soon transformed into fears about global adversaries' abilities to exert undue influence on other areas of national life. A variety of policy responses followed in phases. Near the end of 2018, the Department of Justice launched the China Initiative, a wide-ranging dragnet to stifle economic espionage. The effort would ensnare higher education institutions, faculty, and students. In 2020, the Department of Education began investigating higher education institutions for failure to disclose foreign contributions. The government's newfound interest in enforcing an overlooked regulation prompted outcries from the higher education lobby, which regards donor anonymity as critical to securing private funds. By the Summer of 2022, the U.S. Congress was considering legislation specifically aimed at curbing foreign interference in higher education. Several U.S. states had already passed similar laws. The government and conservative media championed these measures as necessary to address real problems. Higher education actors largely saw them as misguided responses that succeeded more in ruining careers and threatening revenue streams than strengthening national security. Liberals' expectations that Democratic control of the executive and legislative bodies, along with a mixed record of prosecutorial success in China Initiative cases, would redirect national attention elsewhere have not materialized. The idea of foreign interference in higher education now operates within the United States as a *fait accompli*.

Although the apprehension is particularly acute in the United States, American anxiety is not unique. Foreign interference has also become a notable phenomenon in other parts of the world. Responding to growing concerns, the European Union issued guidelines in January 2022 to mitigate foreign interference in university research. These worries may be well founded. That same month, an uproar began in the Netherlands when reports surfaced that a Chinese-funded research center at the Free University of Amsterdam was promoting Chinese propaganda about human rights. Dutch politicians are now calling for foreign interference legislation to preserve the autonomy of higher education institutions and ensure academic freedom. Australia, Singapore, and numerous other countries have already passed foreign interference laws. The trend may well continue to diffuse across the globe.

This article maps discourse and policy on foreign interference in higher education worldwide. We bring together the concepts of sharp power and right-wing authoritarianism to advance the study of the internationalization of higher education toward foreign interference. We contend that foreign interference is a significant problem that merits more scholarly attention. On the one hand, mounting evidence suggests that certain countries are exploiting international students and international research collaborations for geopolitical gain with detrimental effects on national security. On the other hand, a resurgent worldwide authoritarian movement is exploiting these legitimate concerns to augment long-standing assaults on higher education. Yet, there is little research on this subject and almost no comparative analysis. The few relevant studies generally view the problem through the lens of a single country. We, therefore, use discourse analysis and comparative policy analysis to identify relevant trends

and describe the reactions to growing concern about foreign interference in higher education. Understanding the extent of foreign interference in higher education around the world can mitigate its spread and calibrate appropriate policy responses. By cataloging and analyzing foreign interference and reactive legislation cases, this study aims to provide policymakers with evidence-backed observations, empower scholars to join their voices to the narratives, and serve as a springboard for future studies on this topic.

Literature Review

In August 2018, U.S. President Donald Trump reportedly told a group of business leaders that “almost every student that comes over to this country is a spy” (Karni, 2018; Redden, 2018b). According to Google Trends, searches for “academic espionage” reached peak global popularity that month. Indeed, much public discourse on foreign interference in higher education concerns international students or cross-national research. We, therefore, situate our study in the scholarship of international and comparative education as well as higher education. Researchers in these traditions share a common interest in the internationalization of higher education. Indeed, a recent review of two decades of internationalization of higher education research confirms the prominence of two themes relevant to foreign interference: scholar/student mobility and research internationalization (Bedenlier et al., 2018).

International mobility and research collaboration are trends that clearly merit scholarly attention. Yet, much of the research appears to treat these phenomena as implicitly positive developments. For example, Buckner (2019) shows that university administrators in 137 countries frame international students as tools to combat parochialism, support pipelines of skilled labor, or generate revenue. Other authors have highlighted how scholar mobility can facilitate cultural capital (Bauder, 2020) or successful transitions to new career opportunities (Uusimaki & Garvis, 2017). But some scholarship highlights mobility flows and collaboration patterns that reinforce global structures of power (Barnett et al., 2016; Shields, 2013). Others have drawn attention to how experiences with racism in the United States and United Kingdom negatively impact international students, especially from Asia and the Global South (Brown & Jones, 2013; Changamire et al., 2021; Lee & Rice, 2007). Critics of neoliberalism decry the global diffusion of academic capitalism for commodifying international students and knowledge networks (Kauppinen & Cantwell, 2014; Kauppinen et al., 2014). These critical perspectives demonstrate that international students and international research collaborations are mechanisms to investigate as much as they are outcomes to celebrate. Indeed, there remains a gap in understanding the exploitation of these mechanisms for nefarious purposes. In other words, international scholars/students and research collaborations also represent mechanisms for foreign interference.

There is a disconnect between the public and scholarly discourses on foreign interference in higher education. As our findings demonstrate, topics like academic espionage and campus propaganda pervade the English-language media landscape but receive scant attention in the scholarship of international and comparative education or higher education. Espionage is largely unaddressed in these fields’ journals. Lee and Haupt (2020) acknowledge the public academic espionage discourse in their analysis of Sino-American research collaboration. Song (2020) laments the framing of Chinese students as security threats in Australia. Another rare mention occurs only to note that none of the most productive international research collaborators in a multi-national study expressed a concern about espionage (Yemini, 2019). Indeed, recent scholarship suggests that spying in higher education is just as likely to

come from the other direction. Allen and Bista (2022) detail the American government's history of domestic surveillance of international students.

Foreign propaganda is addressed more often, but still only in passing. Suspitsyna and Shalka (2019) found that between 2011-2015, articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* framed Chinese students most commonly as activists and least commonly as supporters of government propaganda. Comparative education scholars briefly mention foreign propaganda in the context of historical studies such as imperialism (Takayama, 2018) or the Cold War (Tsvetkova, 2008). Others speak of domestic propaganda from regimes such as Ba'athists in Iraq (Rohde, 2013) and Syria (Selvik, 2021). Similarly, the concept of interference itself appears in the higher education literature only concerning Chinese university autonomy from the Chinese government (Wilson, 2021), not as something associated with agents of foreign countries. The only mention of foreign interference in comparative education journals that we encountered occurs to assure readers that it was not happening in the development of Vietnamese textbooks despite foreign funding (Salomon & Ket, 2007). Still, the onset of a new era of geopolitics may rejuvenate scholarly interest in international education's vulnerabilities to malign actors (Lee, 2021). Because the scholarship on the internationalization of higher education has not sufficiently addressed foreign interference and related concepts like academic espionage or campus propaganda, constructs from international relations and security studies inform our analysis.

Conceptual Framework

We distinguish interference from influence. Foreign influence is recognized in international relations (Kauppi & Viotti, 2019). Nations routinely attempt to advance their own interests by changing other nations' political, economic, or social policies, practices, and attitudes (Meierding & Sigman, 2021). They influence through coercion, inducements, persuasion, and attraction (Nye, 2004). This perspective on influence is also well trod territory in the literature on international and comparative education, where scholars use frameworks like colonialism (Clarke, 2021), hegemony (Lo, 2011), and global governance (Buckner, 2019), among others, to examine the ways that non-native ideas about education take root. Interference differs from influence in degree. It is, in the words of security analyst Katherine Mansted (2021), the "most pernicious" kind of foreign influence (7).

Foreign Interference

The concept of foreign interference might initially seem anachronistic, as something associated with colonialism or the Cold War. But data suggest that foreign interference is experiencing a renaissance. According to Google Trends, the term achieved peak global popularity in December 2020 when Australia's parliament provided the federal government veto power over any deals a state makes with a foreign government. Later in the month, a flurry of disinformation appeared speculating about foreign interference in the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Indeed, until recently, foreign interference had been primarily associated with electoral integrity (Mohan & Wall, 2019). The concept broadened in 2018 when government agencies in Australia and the United States began applying it to various actions or motivations. Australia's national security legislation from that year describes as foreign interference offenses by, on behalf of, or in collaboration with a foreign principal that are covert or deceptive, threaten harm, or involve a "demand with menaces," i.e., blackmail (National Security Legislation Amendment Act, 2018). That same year, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security published a foreign interference

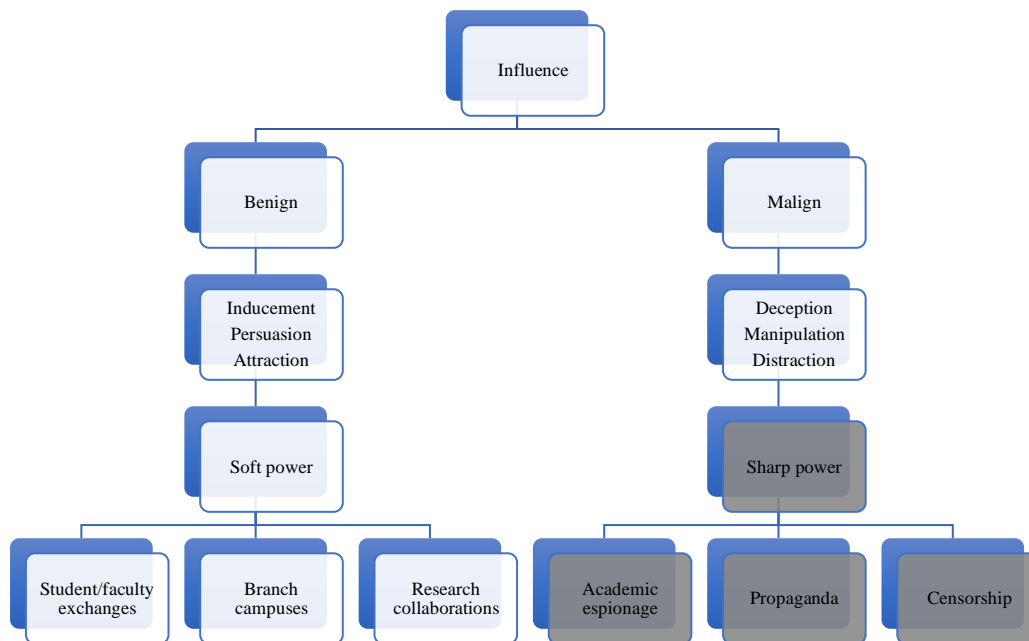
taxonomy that defines foreign interference as “Malign actions taken by foreign governments or foreign actors designed to sow discord, manipulate public discourse, discredit the electoral system, bias the development of policy, or disrupt markets for the purpose of undermining the interests of the United States and its allies” (Department of Homeland Security, 2018).

A key difference between the two understandings of foreign interference is that Australia focuses on conduct, but the U.S. framework is concerned with actors' intent and strategic objectives (Mansted, 2021). This distinction is captured in Americans' penchant for the qualifier *malign*. The 2019 National Defense Authorization Act included a provision for establishing a Malign Foreign Influence Response Center within the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. The office has not been established (Merchant, 2022; Murphy, 2022). The legislation defines malign foreign influence as “any hostile effort undertaken by, at the direction of, or on behalf of or with the substantial support of, the government of a covered foreign country with the objective of influencing, through overt or covert means (A) the political, military, economic, or other policies or activities of the United States Government or State or local governments, including any election within the United States; or (B) the public opinion within the United States” (National Defense Authorization Act, 2019). Covered foreign countries are Russia, Iran, North Korea, and China, a group associated with sharp power.

Sharp power

Joseph Nye introduced (1990) and developed (2004) the concept of soft power to articulate how countries can achieve their foreign policy goals without coercion or payments, i.e., hard power. Since then, soft power has become a catch-all term for the power of attraction and moved beyond its initial utility in political science and international relations. Notably, soft power has added justification for international education. Research indicates that international study experiences improve students' perceptions of their host country and can even help to diffuse host country values upon return (Atkinson, 2010). A global communications consultancy even uses the number of international students a country has in its country's soft power rankings formula (McClory, 2019). Some comparative education scholars have employed soft power as a theoretical framework, especially to explain Chinese and Asian internationalization initiatives (Ghosh et al., 2021; Lee, 2015; Lo & Pan, 2021). Higher education scholars, too, see Western nations increasingly using soft power as a policy rationale for strengthening internationalization (Lomer, 2017; Trilokekar, 2010).

Soft power begat smart power (i.e., the strategic combination of hard and soft power) (Nye, 2009) and, unfortunately, sharp power. Christopher Walker coined this latter term to describe the foreign influence approaches of authoritarian regimes that are neither conventionally hard nor soft. According to Walker, China and Russia increasingly utilize techniques they have perfected at home like distraction, manipulation, and disinformation to shape public opinion abroad (Walker & Ludwig, 2017). This kind of power is sharp because it can “pierce, penetrate, or perforate the political and information environments in the targeted countries” (Walker & Ludwig, 2017, p. 3). Another key element of sharp power is the lack of reciprocity. For example, China takes advantage of the openness of the U.S. media landscape, education environment, and information systems to promote its messages abroad but tightly controls foreign equivalents within its own borders (Walker, 2016). Figure 1 illustrates the relation between soft power and sharp power, with examples of each in higher education.

Figure 1: Patterns of Foreign Influence in Higher Education

There is some debate about whether certain foreign influence mechanisms are soft or sharp. Nye, for example, contends that a Confucius Institute, the Chinese government-backed language and culture centers which diffused throughout American and Australian university campuses in the first two decades of the 21st century (Luqiu & McCarthy, 2019; Yang, 2010), is not reflective of sharp power unless it “crosses the line and tries to infringe on academic freedom (as has occurred in some instances)” (Nye, 2018, p. 3). Walker and Ludwig (2017) stake out a harder line, positing that Chinese educational and cultural activities are inherently marred by the authoritarian nature of the country’s government and its anti-democratic goals (2017). Indeed, Walker asserts that the objective of authoritarian regimes is to stop the spread of democracy (2016). They aim to accomplish this abroad by targeting and undermining key democratic institutions such as elections, the media, and education. What makes sharp power so dangerous is its disguise in the trappings of soft power—international student exchanges, international branch campuses, and international research collaboration. Unlike soft power, though, or even blunt hard power, sharp power is stealthy and difficult to measure. One way to do so is to compile and categorize instances of censorship and manipulation (Walker et al., 2018). This study attempts to do just that by compiling and analyzing media reports of alleged foreign interference in higher education.

Foreign interference in higher education

The literature on foreign interference indicates that sharp powers set their sights on higher education for several reasons: universities are sites of classified research with implications for economic, technological, and military advancement; faculty and administrators shape public opinion and influence government policy; ideas in foreign scholarship can undermine national narratives; and minority students abroad have greater access to non-sanctioned support networks.

In the United States and Australia, especially, the sharp power of greatest concern is China (Bochner, 2020; Hannas & Tatlow, 2021; Lloyd-Damnjanovic, 2018). China operates more than 250

talent programs to recruit foreign assets but only publicly promotes a handful (Normile, 2022; Weinstein, 2020). Prominent among them is the Thousand Talents Plan, which recruits foreign scientists to affiliate with Chinese universities. The U.S. government’s China Initiative has zeroed in on these programs in high profile academic espionage cases. When it comes to higher education, though, the chief apprehension with China has been Confucius Institutes. Walker and Ludwig (2017) observe that in Confucius Institutes there is the deliberate avoidance or one-sided framing of sensitive topics—in other words, self-censorship and propaganda.

Tromblay (2018) points to Confucius Institutes as examples of how foreign powers influence higher education through “strategic philanthropy.” Sharp powers identify funding gaps and provide ample resources to strengthen academic programs. Foreign interference via financial support can be overt or covert. Cooley et al. (2021) highlight donations to universities—along with invited lectures and admissions—as ways malign foreign actors openly launder their reputations abroad. Conversely, Faizal et al. (2020) mention covert funding of higher education programs as an interference mechanism. Similarly, the U.S. Department of Education has expressed concern about the national security implications of universities’ failures to disclose foreign gifts (Department of Education, 2020). Another way that sharp powers can obtain financial leverage over another country is by weaponizing the enrollments of international students (Tiffert, 2020). A prime example occurred when Saudi Arabia withdrew its funding for 5,000 Saudi students in Canadian universities after Canada’s foreign minister criticized the Gulf nation’s imprisonment of women’s rights activists (Redden, 2018a).

Students are not always passive actors in foreign interference. Sharp powers may also attempt to block lines of faculty research or thwart institutional policies by deploying student groups in pressure campaigns (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2018; Tromblay, 2018). China and Israel have resorted to these tactics in the United States and Australia. China’s transnational repression campaigns weaken the experience of minority students (Rotella, 2021) and threaten academic freedom in Australia (McNeil, 2021) and the United States (Tiffert, 2020).

Table 1: Motivations and Mechanisms for Actors to Interfere in Higher Education Abroad

Goals	Strategies	Tactics
Expedite knowledge	Espionage	Deploy international students and scholars to gather intelligence; recruit foreign faculty into talent programs
Suppress knowledge	Self-censorship	Deploy student groups to protest university policies and intimidate faculty
Repress own citizens	Censorship	Deploy student groups to harass other student populations
Generate favorable public opinion	Propaganda, philanthropy	Secure invitations to lecture, gain admission into reputable institutions, directly provide academic programs, donate to institutions and programs
Generate favorable policy	Propaganda, philanthropy	Secure invitations to lecture, weaponize enrollments

American Context for Intensifying Attention on Foreign Interference in Higher Education

Foreign interference in higher education is not a new phenomenon. Russia has employed students and professors as spies in American universities since the 1930s (Golden, 2018). So why is foreign interference in higher education gaining such traction now? A review of contemporary political, economic, and social trends can help explain the renewed public concern.

Contemporary foreign interference in higher education occurs amid the global rise of the far right (Miller-Idriss, 2020), variously expressed as authoritarianism (Diamond et al., 2016), illiberalism (Sajó et al., 2021), nationalism (Mylonas & Tudor, 2021), or populism (Moffitt, 2017), as well as the intersection of these trends (Blokker, 2021; Brubaker, 2020). Mudde (2022) defines the far right as groups and ideologies that believe social inequities should be maintained rather than overcome, and who reject values of democracy or liberal democracy such as majority rule, minority rights, and separation of powers. A common interpretation of the increase of these phenomena is a reaction to neoliberal globalization (Antonio, 2019; Berberoglu, 2021; Peters, 2018). The features of far-right movements can vary by country, but are generally characterized by hostility toward elites, decline in trust in social institutions, and rejection of democratic processes. Indeed, multiple international monitoring agencies have observed democratic backsliding worldwide since 2016, including in established democracies like the United Kingdom and United States (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021; Freedom House, 2021; IDEA, 2021). We, therefore, understand far right authoritarianism as the public expression of hostile, anti-democratic ideologies through collective action and/or institutions of power, especially media and government.

In the United States, the contemporary far right backlash against neoliberal globalization has breathed new life into a *mélange* of the nation's most repugnant traits: xenophobia, philistinism, and paranoia, among others. These national characteristics interact with higher education in ways that render the sector increasingly vulnerable to domestic opponents.

Xenophobia

Throughout its history, America has been both a nation of immigrants and a nation afraid of them (Lee, 2019). After 9/11, American xenophobia manifested primarily as Islamophobia. By the mid-2010s, animosity toward immigrants shifted to the southern border where Central Americans were attempting to cross in unprecedented numbers. Since the beginning of the pandemic, fear of the other has been expressed increasingly as anti-Asian bias (Gutierrez et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2021) and violence (Ruiz et al., 2021). America's periodic xenophobic inflammations are correlated with isolationist movements (Kupchan, 2020). We see this with *America First*, the translation of which into both public discourse and government policy yielded substantial declines in the number of international students. These outcomes were celebrated by hard-liners. However, research rejects the contention that international students occupy coveted admissions slots that could be filled by Americans. To the contrary, the presence of foreign students actually increases domestic enrollments (Shih, 2015). But the misperception remains, and the narrative persists.

Philistinism

Americans' deeply rooted values of self-reliance and pragmatism can perversely manifest as a willful ignorance of, and even outright hostility toward, non-utilitarian learning, especially in the liberal

arts. What Hofstadter (1963) identified more than half a century ago as anti-intellectualism in American life, Nichols (2017) more recently sees as the death of expertise. Rejection of experts and established knowledge has always been part of the American political dynamic, but it has begun to move from the fringe to the mainstream. Decline in trust of social institutions is widespread (Pew Research Center, 2021; Rainie et al., 2019), but confidence increasingly diverges along partisan lines. Nowhere is this more evident than in higher education. Polls show that 59 percent of Republicans believe that colleges have a negative effect on the country, compared to 18 percent of Democrats (Parker, 2019). Perception of college professors is central to conservative views of higher education. Nearly four in five Republicans believe that higher education is heading in the wrong direction because professors bring their political and social views into the classroom. Conservatives are antagonistic toward higher education, and they see professors as the problem.

Paranoia

Hofstadter (1964) also teaches us that conspiratorial thinking is neither unique to the United States nor to our present moment but lurks beneath the surface of most societies and eras. Some places and times, however, are more prone to channeling conspiracies into movements. Ethnic, religious, and class conflicts bring these about in the United States. Each successive struggle results in the right-wing of the country feeling dispossessed of previously held authority. When these Americans no longer participate in the nation's decision-making structures, they presume dark forces are at work. We see this in the rise of QAnon. But the same thinking applies to higher education. The American right-wing is less likely to participate in higher education (Bailey & Williams, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2020) and more likely to hold antagonistic views of the sector. For them, higher education is a black box. The conspiratorial right-wing is therefore not inclined to make charitable interpretations of phenomena for which it has incomplete information, such as foreign gifts to universities. Conservatives also feel ostracized and persecuted on campus, which is reflected in recent concerns about cancel culture. The paranoid style in American politics renders higher education suspicious at best and malicious at worst.

The American right's disdain for and skepticism of higher education, coupled with its growing isolationism and long undercurrent of xenophobia all combine to make foreign interference a flashpoint. It is why conservative media and advocacy organizations monitor Confucius Institutes and foreign gifts to universities. It is why Republican legislators initiate and amplify allegations of academic espionage. A mixed record of prosecutions from the China Initiative shows that there is both foreign interference and not. Foreign interference therefore appears to sober observers at once a legitimate and overblown concern. Indeed, when it comes to foreign interference in higher education, there are both perceived and actual perpetrators and perceived and actual victims.

Research Questions

The preceding sections define foreign interference, identify it as an approach to foreign relations of certain authoritarian countries, and suggest aspects of higher education in democratic countries that may be susceptible to it. We also articulate why fears of foreign interference are intensifying. Still, we do not know, in any systematic way, what the scale and content of the concerns and responses are. Nor do we know who is shaping the public discourse.

This study seeks to answer the following questions: Where and to what extent is foreign interference in higher education a concern? Who are the alleged perpetrators of foreign interference? What has been the content of public discourse about foreign interference? In other words, what concerns underlie the fear of foreign interference in higher education? What actions are being taken around the world to combat such interference? And how do different countries' approaches compare to one another? Finally, whose voices are shaping the narrative around foreign interference?

Methodology

Data Collection

This study analyzes news media to examine the public discourse around foreign interference in English-language sources. Discourse analysis is useful for interrogating the conditions that precede actions such as policy responses (Dunn & Neumann, 2016). We also examine government webpages to compare foreign interference policies. Comparative policy analysis can strengthen public policy (Radin & Weimer, 2018). We collected data through targeted web searches and snowball sampling to compile a corpus of 161 texts covering a 30-month timespan from May 2019 to November 2021. Figure 2 demonstrates the temporal distribution of texts.

We targeted searches by setting Google Alerts for the phrases “foreign influence” and “foreign interference.” We also searched for “[country name]” plus “foreign influence” plus “legislation” for information about specific national governments' responses. Snowball sampling involved following links from one article to another to gather information on similar cases and subscribing to international

Figure 2: Number of Articles by Publication Month

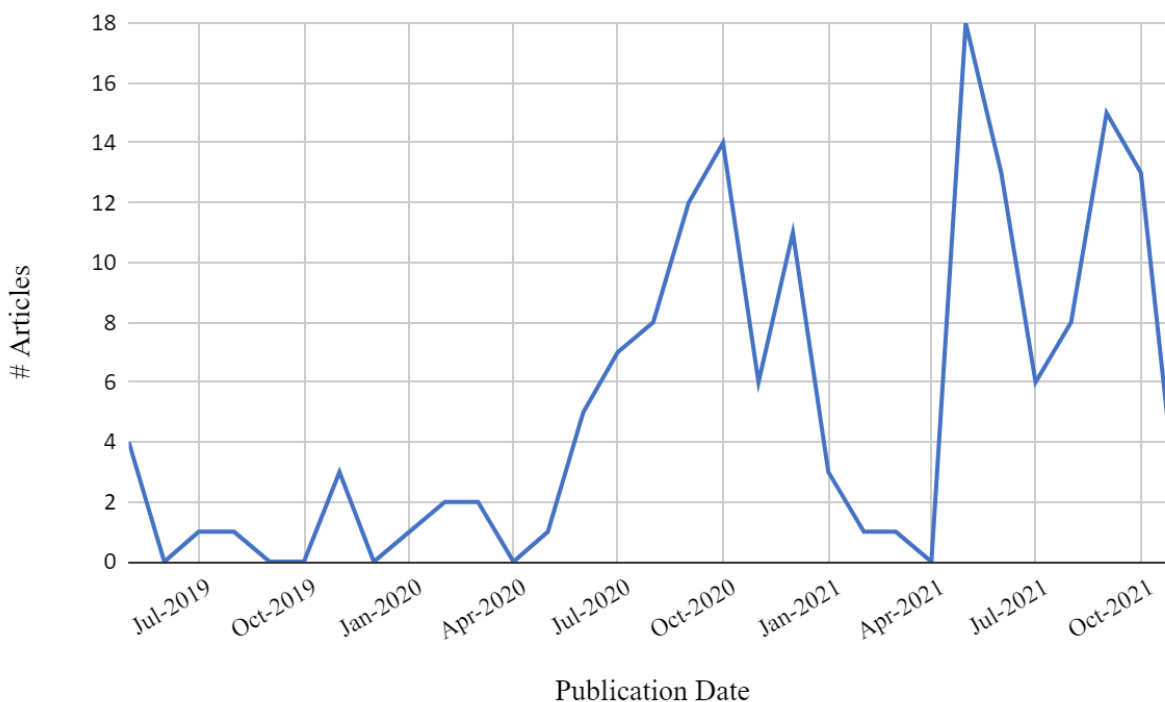
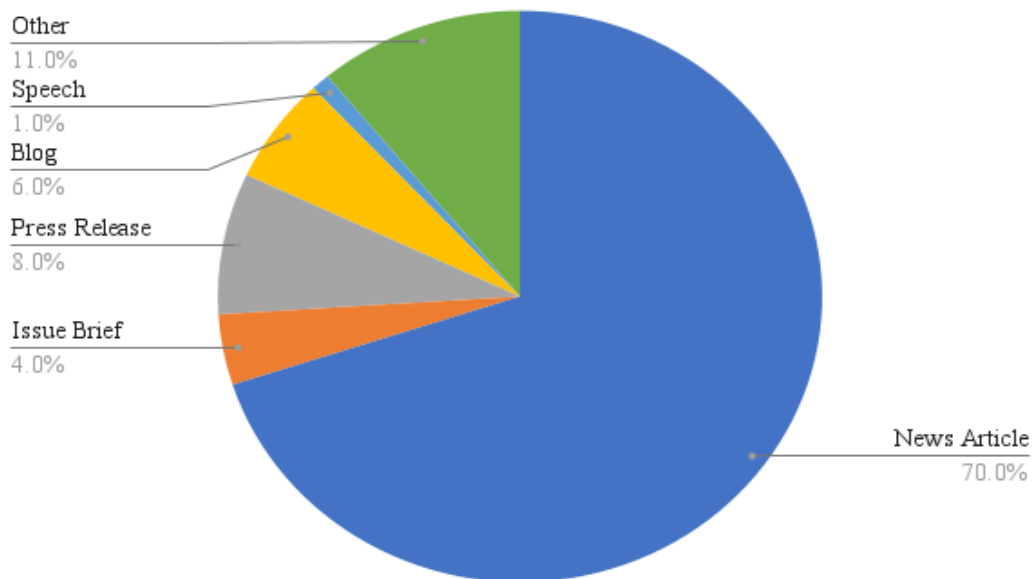


Figure 3: Distribution of Source Types in the Foreign Interference in Higher Education Dataset



education-related periodicals such as Karin Fischer’s *Latitudes* newsletter to identify relevant cases and sources.

The news sources represent a variety of countries but skew heavily toward American media. They range from higher education-focused periodicals such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (U.S.), *Times Higher Education* (U.K.), and *University World News* (international) to national outlets such as *National Public Radio* (U.S.), *The Wall Street Journal* (U.S.), and the *Hindustan Times* (India) to local or regional papers such as *The Ripon Advance* (Wisconsin, U.S.) and *The Canberra Times* (Canberra, Australia). Although news articles make up about 70 percent of the data set, there are a variety of other texts including blogs, issue briefs, speeches, press releases, presentations, and letters, as shown in Figure 3.

Data Analysis

After collecting the data, we cataloged, coded, and analyzed each source entry. We noted of each source the country responding (i.e., the alleged victim), the country of concern (i.e., the alleged perpetrator), programs or policies of concern, the specific content of concern, and individuals quoted. Specific content of concern refers to what underlying fear was described as motivating the actions described in the text, such as the fear that visiting scholars would steal research secrets or that foreign partners could threaten to withhold funding to pressure universities to censor themselves from teaching about topics that would upset the foreign partner. We entered these codes into a spreadsheet that we could sort and manipulate to discern patterns in the data.

We coded texts from U.S.-based sources with a bias rating score. Approximately a quarter of texts in the database appear in sources with bias ratings on AllSides, an organization that evaluates political leanings in news media. AllSides rates media organizations on a five-point scale: Left – Lean Left – Center – Lean Right – Right. We used the same scale to code an additional 70 texts ourselves. We

exercised caution by refraining from assigning extreme positions of Left or Right to any texts. We assigned texts from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed* the label “Lean Left.” We assigned texts from *Campus Reform* or the offices of Republican legislators the label “Lean Right.” We labeled texts from executive offices like the Department of Justice “Lean Left” or “Lean Right” depending on which party occupied the presidency when the text appeared. Although, we labeled texts from the FBI as center regardless of the occupant.

We also developed a five-point scale to analyze whether texts quoted experts or authority figures supporting university or government positions: University – Support University – Neutral – Support Government – Government. We coded a text that cited only Frank Wo, President of Queens College as “University.” We coded a text that cited only Robert Daly, Director of the Kissinger Institute at the Wilson Center as “Support University.” We coded a text that quoted only Florida Governor Ron DeSantis as “Government.” We coded a text that quoted only Ryan Mauro, a national security analyst with the Clarion Project as “Support Government.” We coded texts that cited figures supportive of both university and government positions as “Neutral.”

Limitations

Our dataset is not exhaustive. It does not cover every relevant case of foreign interference in higher education publicized during the period under examination. The dataset represents a snapshot of the English-language discourse on foreign interference in higher education over the course of the 2.5 years under consideration. It is limited to English-language sources, which skew heavily toward covering the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and other countries with English as their primary language. We also conducted our desktop research primarily in the United States via Google searches. This practice narrowed the sources that we had access to through snowball sampling. Google emphasizes sources that optimize their placement in the search engine via the prevalence of key words, mobile-phone usability of the webpage, inclusion of internal and external links, and page loading speed, etc. These factors influenced what sources came to our attention.

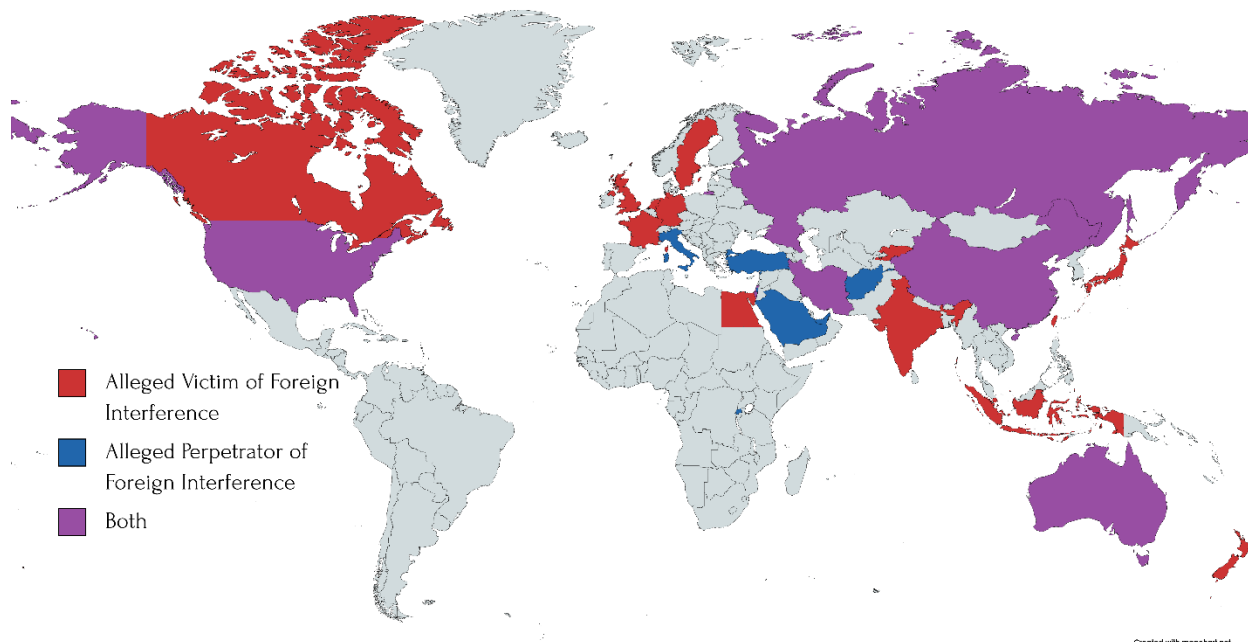
Findings

Concerns

Countries of Concern

The data set contains allegations of foreign interference in higher education against fourteen countries. The primary source of concern is China, which appears in 72 percent of entries. China concerns Australia, Canada, the European Union, France, Germany, India, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Remarkably, when a nation alleges interference by China, it is treated as the sole threat 89 percent of the time. In the few instances where China is mentioned along with other nations, the others tend to be concerns primarily of the United States, namely Qatar, Russia, and Saudi Arabia. Indeed, the database shows these three countries as concerns of the United States alone. Iran is also a concern of the United States, but also of France and the United Kingdom. Notably, multiple countries are concerned about the United States interfering in their higher

Figure 4: Countries Involved in Public Discourse About Foreign Interference in Higher Education



Note: Map created with <https://mapchart.net/>.

education systems, including ally France as well as China, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia. Nearly 14 percent of entries express concern about an unspecified foreign threat.

Units of Concern

Public discourse on foreign interference centers on various levels and actors within higher education. A majority (58 percent) of the entries in the dataset addressed concerns and actions at the institutional level. Institutional partnerships and institutional agreements with said partners figured prominently among these entries, including funding from foreign sources as well as influence over curriculum and campus culture. The dataset includes specific mention of 52 American higher education institutions, primarily falling under the R1 Carnegie classification for doctoral universities with very high research activity. They include a mix of private (Georgetown University, Yale University) and public institutions (California system campuses), as well as elite (Harvard University, Stanford University) and mass (University of Tennessee, the Ohio State University) universities. Thirty-one institutions (63 percent) appear only once. Among those mentioned multiple times, Stanford (7) appears most often. Sources reference Stanford in the context of visiting scholar visa fraud, foreign funding investigation, and a faculty campaign requesting cessation of the China Initiative. Georgetown (6), Harvard (6), and Tennessee (5) also appear in multiple entries. Five of six references to Harvard concern Charles Lieber, the university's Chemistry and Chemical Biology Department chair who would later be convicted of making false statements about his financial ties to China and failing to report foreign income. Beyond the United States, Australian universities were the next most prominent in the data set. Individual institutions there received comparatively fewer mentions, but references were typically made to Group of Eight institutions.

Texts that did not focus on content at the institutional level addressed students, researchers, and professors. A small number of articles discussed concerns regarding politicians and social media users. Some articles referred to more than one unit of concern.

Content of Concern

Research Theft

The data point to three categories of concern about stolen research. First, countries fear that academic espionage will expose vulnerabilities in their national security and/or enable adversaries to enhance their own military capacity. For example, in 2021, the provincial government of Alberta, Canada, requested that its four major research universities pause any new partnerships associated with the Chinese government out of concern that deliverables from those arrangements would be used by Chinese military and intelligence entities (CBC News, 2021). Similarly, in 2020, the United States revoked visas for 1,000 Chinese graduate students with alleged military ties (Li & McElveen, 2020). Second, stolen research can also position thieves to out-compete the victimized country economically. Indeed, the stated purpose of the U.S. Department of Justice's China Initiative was to identify and prosecute economic espionage. The department cites a report that states that China's industrial policy includes economic aggression to drive its own future economic growth (Department of Justice, 2022). Third, research theft can facilitate human rights violations that contradict the values of the victimized country. China drew censure from a Yale researcher and the U.S. company Thermo Fisher after they learned China was exploiting their research collaboration on DNA to develop a surveillance system of the Uighur ethnic group in Xinjiang (Wee, 2019).

Censorship and Propaganda

Fears concerning censorship and propaganda range from limiting academic freedom to pressuring academics and students to self-censor to imposing the values of a foreign nation onto the domestic population. These concerns are generally promoted by American conservative pundits and politicians. For example, some critics of Confucius Institutes, including the attorney general of the state of Indiana, characterize them as attempts by the Chinese Communist party to indoctrinate young Americans (Magdaleno & Herron, 2021). Conservatives also drive the discourse on foreign gift disclosures. Right-wing outlets like *Campus Reform*, *The Clarion Project*, and *The Daily Caller* promoted attempts by the U.S. Department of Education and Republican legislators to expose and curtail funding from American adversaries, principally but not exclusively China.

Indeed, China is not the only country involved in accusations of censorship and propaganda in education. Politicians in Kyrgyzstan have claimed that the American University of Central Asia promotes Western values such as LGBTQ acceptance (Imanaliyeva, 2020). The French education minister accused the United States of spreading identity politics that fragment society after professors faced pushback for teaching about racism, Islamophobia, and colonization (Matthews, 2020). Lastly, Russian authorities suggested that pro-American factions and organizations have encouraged student protests at universities and are attacking Russian values by promoting democracy and painting Russia in a negative light (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Civil Unrest

The above examples from France and Russia also demonstrate the fear that foreign interference can destabilize national identity and create disorder. Along the same vein, Indonesia’s counter-terrorism agency has expressed concern that restoring the Taliban regime in Afghanistan will exacerbate terrorist activity rooted in radical Islamic ideologies on university campuses (Yamin, 2021). As a final example, Singapore passed the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act to combat a perceived threat of foreign campaigns to sow social discord and undermine its national sovereignty (Ross, 2021). Although the law is not targeted at higher education specifically, many academics there have expressed concern that it would impact their ability to collaborate with foreign partners.

Responses

Countries Responding

Our database identifies 20 countries that have expressed concern about foreign interference in their higher education systems. A majority (65 percent) of the entries are about foreign interference in the United States, but foreign interference is also a growing concern in Australia (12 percent) and Europe (9 percent).

Specific Actors Responding

At 80 percent of the data set, national and local governments are the primary entities responding to foreign interference. The remaining 20 percent cite a wide range of non-government respondents such as higher education institutions, presidential campaigns, non-profit organizations, and research firms. The five most frequently cited actors were the U.S Department of Justice (including the FBI, 26), the U.S. government broadly (15), the U.S. Congress or individual U.S. congress members (15), the U.S. Department of Education (14), and U.S. higher education institutions (12). All three branches of the U.S. federal government are represented, with the executive branch more active than the legislative or judicial. Multiple state governments, including Florida, Indiana, and Wisconsin, responded to foreign interference.

Among Australian actors, governmental departments and agencies (12) significantly outnumber higher education institutions (4) as respondents. Specifically, multiple articles referenced the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade as well as the Department of Education, Skills, and Employment.

National Policy Responses

This section compares government policy actions of eight countries featured in our data set. They include the five most frequently cited alleged victims of foreign interference—the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Singapore—as well as Japan and India, who are collaborating with the United States and Australia as members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, also known as the Quad. We also include China, which has taken notable steps to protect its own education system from foreign interference. Table 2 provides an overview. A more detailed analysis of each country’s approach follows.

The table shows that the United States has taken the most stringent measures among the democratic countries listed, passing legislation to thwart foreign interference from multiple angles.

Table 2: Policy Responses of Select Countries to Concerns About Foreign Interference in Higher Education

Government actions	U.S.	Canada	U.K.	Australia	India	Japan	Singapore	China
Regulate international partnerships (e.g., Confucius Institutes)	x	x		x	x			
Withhold government funding to institutions with undesired practices	x					x		
Restrict visas for inbound students and scholars	x				x	x		
Monitor and regulate foreign funding	x					x		
Investigate and prosecute individuals/organizations	x							
Provide funding to universities to enhance security						x		
Block/monitor apps and internet content					x		x	x
Restrict outgoing passports and visas								x
Discourage foreign language learning								x
Restrict foreign textbooks								x

Individual American states are also passing, or attempting to pass, their laws, primarily focused on foreign funding. Quad allies carefully monitor American policies, often reporting them in their local media, and adapting them to their circumstances. For example, Japan has also implemented policies

monitoring foreign higher education partnerships with countries of concern such as China. But instead of a top-down federal approach, they involve academics in the process of investigating wrongdoings by scholars and offer federal funding to help institutions develop better security frameworks. Japanese leadership intends to leave it to universities to manage their relationships but provides support to do so in a way that protects national security (Kakuchi, 2020). India and Australia have also taken measures that emulate the United States, including investigating Confucius Institutes. Australia went a step further than the U.S. by creating a policy that allows the federal government to veto foreign higher education partnerships that it finds suspicious. Regulating Confucius Institutes has been the most common collective tactic among the Quad, followed by increasing visa scrutiny of—and implementing restrictions on—inbound international students and scholars.

Like the United States, Canada is seeing sub-national governments step up with stricter legislation than the federal government. As mentioned above, Alberta has ordered its four comprehensive academic and research universities to pause any new partnerships with links to the Chinese government and to review its existing relationships. The national government has not gone so far but is now requiring that universities submit risk assessments with all research funding requests.

The United Kingdom, in contrast, has not passed any legislation regarding foreign interference in higher education. Critics argue that British institutions and policymakers are too focused on the economic profits it receives from China (China Research Group, 2020). Members of parliament, however, have been lobbying for regulations that would require registering foreign agents and reducing dependency on China.

Singapore passed a Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act in Fall 2021. This wide-ranging policy was purportedly aimed at preventing foreign interference from undermining democratic society, but critics fear that it could restrict academic freedom because international research collaborations or any publications critical of the Singaporean government could be prosecuted under the reach of this new policy (George et al., 2021).

China seeks to mitigate Western influence by limiting the use of overseas textbooks in schools and placing less emphasis on testing English language competency (Yuan, 2021). It also seeks to exert influence over its citizens studying abroad. For example, a Chinese citizen studying in Canada believes his family was threatened by the Chinese government in response to criticisms he posted anonymously on Twitter (Chiu, 2021).

Voices Shaping Discourse

The most common sources in our dataset are news organizations dedicated to higher education. Along with the U.S. Department of Justice (8), *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (9), *University World News* (8), and *Inside Higher Ed* (6) are three of the top four most repeated sources. The mean and median entry in our set is Center (e.g., *NPR*, *Reuters*, *Associated Press*). A plurality of texts are Left or Lean Left, while a plurality of unique sources are Right or Lean Right (see Table 3). Representative Left or Lean Left sources include the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Ed*, and *The New York Times*. Right or Lean Right sources are more diffuse. They range from think tanks like The Clarion Project and the Foundation for Defense of Democracies—both of which the Council on American-Islamic Relations regard as “Islamophobic” (Shahbaz, 2021)—to local papers. Seven of eight local papers in the database are in states controlled by Republican legislatures. Among press releases from legislators, all are from

Table 3: Biases of Texts and Unique Sources

	Texts	Unique Sources
Left or Lean Left	47 (42.0%)	21 (32.8%)
Center	27 (24.1%)	16 (25.0%)
Right or Lean Right	38 (33.9%)	27 (42.2%)
Total	112 (100%)	64 (100%)

Republicans. Numerous other press releases, speeches, and miscellaneous documents are issued by high-ranking Trump administration officials in the Education, Justice, and State Departments.

Entries in our database routinely include commentary from experts. Government officials are the most frequently quoted individuals. Forty-seven percent of the entries feature quotes from government representatives, ranging from legislators to spokespeople for various government agencies to federal and state prosecutors to heads-of-state. The U.S. FBI Director Christopher Wray (7) was the most frequently cited individual, followed by former Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos (6), and former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (5). Government voices call for enhanced support and sustained vigilance to counter foreign interference. For example, in a co-signed statement quoted in an Associated Press story, Pompeo and DeVos allege, “The presence of this authoritarian influence on our campuses has never been more concerning, nor more consequential” (Binkley, 2020). Similarly, the *New York Times* quoted Wray’s congressional testimony in which he interpreted “naivete on the part of the academic sector” about foreign interference (Green, 2019).

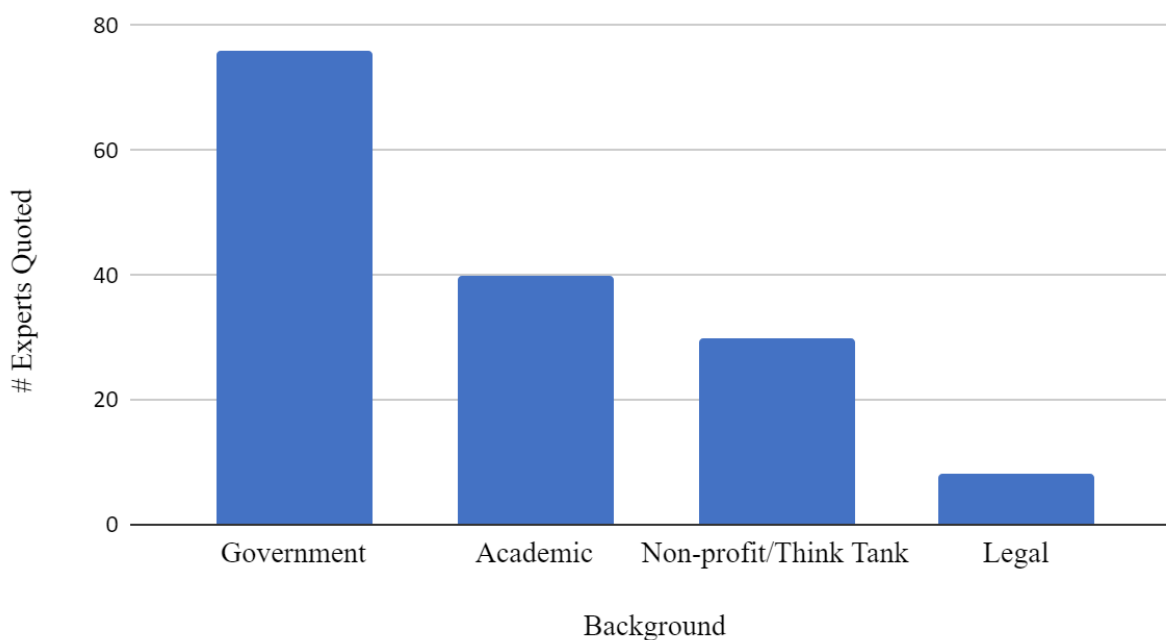
Figure 5: Background of Experts Quoted

Table 4: The Function of Experts in Texts by Source Bias

	Amplify University	Balance University/Government	Amplify Government	Total
Left or Lean Left	14	7	8	29
Center	8	0	5	13
Right or Lean Right	2	1	24	27
Total	24	8	37	69

Academics, including professors, college and university presidents, and institution spokespeople, made up the next most common group of experts quoted. They appear in 25 percent of the data set, nearly half as often as government officials. Academics in these texts typically oppose government positions. For example, multiple entries cite Steven Chu, the Nobel Prize-winning Stanford physicist and former Secretary of Energy, and Margaret K. Lewis, a Seton Hall law professor, both of whom argue that the United States should reconsider its approach to research security. Chu raises alarms about the impact of the China Initiative on the scientific community. Lewis has concerns about ethnic profiling. Representatives from non-profit associations and think tanks also figure in, at 19 percent combined. Lastly, legal experts made up about 5 percent of experts cited. Corporate cybersecurity specialists, members of the media, and social media users are also quoted occasionally.

There are 69 instances in which a text with a bias score quotes one or more experts or authority figures. The median expert or authority figure supports government positions. Table 4 shows that texts from Right or Lean Right sources are more likely to amplify government positions, while texts from Left or Lean Left sources are more likely to amplify university positions. Notably, though, Left or Lean Left sources are far more likely to amplify government positions than Right or Lean Right sources are to amplify university positions.

Discussion

Findings demonstrate that foreign interference is an especially serious concern in the United States, but that allegations of foreign interference in higher education are common in many other countries. The prominence of China as the supposed source of so much interference suggests the need for greater scrutiny of its possible meddling in the higher education systems of other countries, especially neighboring Asian nations. The English-language limitation of our database may skew the results toward cases from Western countries. That is why including nations like India, Japan, and Singapore in the database is especially notable. Considerable Chinese investments in African higher education in recent years makes the absence of any examples from that continent particularly conspicuous. Latin American nations are also absent from the data. Further research can identify whether these continents' news outlets may be reporting concerns in local languages, or whether there is truly a lack of concern regarding foreign interference in higher education in these areas.

Despite warranted concerns about its sharp power tactics, America's preoccupation with China in this context strikes an uncomfortable note given the country's anti-Chinese racist history from the Chinese Exclusion Act in the 19th century to the Red Scares after each world war to the modern-day xenophobia stirred up by associations between the COVID-19 pandemic and China as the virus's place of

origin. In this light, the China Initiative might best be understood as “merely a formal gloss on a racialized moral panic” (Lewis-Kraus, 2022). More than half of defendants in economic espionage cases since 2009 have been of Chinese descent (Kim, 2021). That is a major reason why a report from the American Physical Society (2021) on the impact of U.S. research security policies recommended renaming the China Initiative to focus on the crime, not the assumed perpetrators. Advocacy letters in our dataset echo this recommendation. In February 2022, the Department of Justice announced that it would do just that, touting a new broader approach called the Strategy for Countering Nation-State Threats (Department of Justice, 2022). The new strategy promised to use administrative tools rather than merely prosecutorial ones to address perceived threats, but critics are watching closely to see if prosecutions of professors continue.

The high volume of institutions listed suggests that while there are well-known cases of foreign interference at specific institutions (e.g., Charles Lieber at Harvard), the problem is more widespread. The discourse’s emphasis on research universities underscores the importance of research theft as the primary concern, and for a good reason. Since 2010, the share of U.S. federal investment in applied research and experimental development has increased while investment in basic research has declined (Trapani & Gibbons, 2020). Research institutions enroll the most international students and host the most international scholars (Institute of International Education, 2022). American universities also collected more than a billion dollars in anonymous donations from China, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Russia between 2012 and 2020 (Department of Education, 2020). The concentration of knowledge and wealth at these institutions renders them targets of foreign and domestic adversaries alike. Sharp powers use espionage to steal research and philanthropy to promote propaganda. Conservative opponents amplify reporting on these issues from mainstream sources to suggest greater state control of higher education in right-wing discourse.

Responses to perceived threats vary by country, but it is clear that some countries are following the lead of the United States. Australia, India, and Japan are coordinating foreign interference responses with the United States. European regulations are tightening and may converge with the Quad approaches. In February 2022, the United States Embassy in Dublin warned an Irish university about partnering with a Chinese university the U.S. Department of Commerce has identified as an entity with activities contrary to U.S. interests or national security (Mahon, 2022). This example suggests the possibility of increased global coordination against sharp power. Such collaboration is a welcome development, but ironic if it stifles international research collaboration, as many academic observers have warned and recent research has confirmed. Since the start of the China Initiative, the number of scholars who declare dual affiliations to universities in China and the United States has dropped by 20 percent (Van Noorden, 2022). During the same period, the productivity and citation rates of U.S.-based university life science researchers with long-standing ties to China have declined more than colleagues with ties to other countries (Jia et al., 2022).

Our data indicate that the voices of university actors are drowned in a sea of government sound bites advocating vigilance and even regressive policies. Right-wing pundits and policymakers are all too eager to stir up anti-university sentiment. Data show a polarized media environment with a paucity of balanced information. Still, what is apparent through our data is that national and local governments alone cannot combat foreign interference. There must be a concerted effort shared by governments, scholars,

media, civil rights groups, and the public to understand the issue better, develop the best strategies for mitigating it, and implement those strategies fairly and effectively.

Conclusion

A global review of the English-language discourse on foreign interference in higher education tells the following story. Universities are taking in more foreign students, scholars, and dollars. Governments, too, are spending more on classified research at universities. These factors combine to render higher education targets of sharp powers eager to subvert democracies and facilitate their own military and economic advancement. The perpetrator-in-chief is China, which orchestrates a vast campaign to steal research, spread propaganda, and censor its citizens abroad. Accordingly, China's adversaries are increasingly concerned about their research universities. Evidence of actual foreign interference is mixed, but the fear of it is unmistakable. Consequently, more and more countries are responding by ramping up enforcement of existing regulations and passing new legislation. Much of the furor is driven by an emboldened, conspiratorial right-wing which see universities in general and international education in particular as antithetical to its nationalist and isolationist aims. Still, concerns about the deleterious impacts of academic espionage on economic competitiveness and national security mean that foreign interference has become a bi-partisan issue. Government voices drive the narrative. Higher education actors are marginal players. The Biden Administration's announcement of its intent to re-establish an advisory council that allows the academic community to weigh in on national security matters that impact higher education is a promising step to balancing competing concerns.

Our study helps to bridge the gap between the primarily positive framing of the internationalization of higher education in scholarly discourse and the negative focus on foreign interference in higher education in the media, government, and other public discourse. This study serves as an important first step of bringing a comprehensive approach to cataloging, categorizing, and analyzing cases of foreign interference in higher education that surface in public discourse. We have identified higher education institutions as the top unit of concern; research theft, censorship and propaganda, and civil unrest as the most feared impacts; China, the United States, and Australia as the key countries involved; different ways that countries are using policy to confront these concerns; and government actors as the dominant voices in the discourse.

Scholars and policymakers alike need more research on areas of the world not examined by this study including Africa, Latin America, and Asian countries beyond India, China, Japan, and Singapore. Research into non-English discourse on foreign interference in these regions would provide a valuable supplement to the data we collected. Furthermore, continued effort is required to determine how best to identify and measure foreign interference and the consequences of various policy responses. Foreign interference in higher education—actual and perceived—merits urgency and diligence from scholars and policymakers.

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KYLE A. LONG, Ph.D., is an administrator at Northwestern University, a non-resident Research Fellow of the Center on Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California, and a lecturer in the Graduate School of Higher Education and Development at the George Washington University. Dr. Long's research focuses on overseas international campuses and the geopolitics of higher education. He earned the Best Book Award (2022) from the Comparative and International Education Society's Higher Education Special Interest Group for *The Emergence of the American University Abroad* (Brill | Sense, 2020). His writing has appeared in *International Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Ed*, and *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*. Among his prior appointments are UNESCO Co-Chair of International Education for Development at the George Washington University, Director of Higher Education Research for Hanover Research, and inaugural Director of the U.S. Office for the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani. Dr. Long earned a Ph.D. in International and Comparative Education from Columbia University. Email: kyle.long@northwestern.edu.

CARLY O'CONNELL is the Programs and Global Initiatives Specialist at the American Council on Education, where her work focuses on campus internationalization, global challenges facing higher education, and global engagement strategy. Her work on foreign influence in higher education has been published in *International Higher Education* and presented at the China and Higher Education Conference 2021 and Comparative and International Education Society Conference 2022. She holds a M.A. in International Education from the George Washington University and a B.A. in Linguistics and Chinese Language and Culture from William & Mary. Email: ceoconnell@gwu.edu.