Special Issue Introduction

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# Introduction to Special Issue on Foreign Interference in Higher Education

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Higher education is intertwined with geopolitics. Russia's war in Ukraine provides numerous examples. Governments and universities allied with Ukraine have offered refuge to the invaded country's students and scholars while suspending international research and study programs with Russian partners. Two members of the United States Congress even called for the expulsion of all Russian students in American universities. Meanwhile, Russian officials, who have attempted to repatriate their students abroad for years, have renewed their pleas for students to come home. These few examples illustrate how national political responses to regional conflicts can impact higher learning globally.

Fortunately, geopolitical analysis is a familiar endeavor to scholars of international higher education. The legacies of colonialism, the Cold War, and Covid-19 are common concerns. Still, analysts have begun to recognize a shift in how higher education is involved in today's international politics. The increased

volume of international student mobility, the amplified impact of university-based research, and the growing prestige and profits associated with world-class universities combine to make students, scholars, and institutions significant variables in policymakers' geopolitical calculations. Some scholars therefore see international higher education entering an era of "new geopolitics" (Sabzalieva et al., 2021; Trilokekar, 2022). This era is characterized by the rise of China, the resurgence of Russia, and a general de-Westernization of world order.

The new geopolitics is fundamentally changing our idea of international education. The internationalization of higher education promotes intercultural understanding and prepares graduates for a global workforce. Until recently, these noble rationales have often obscured more nefarious ones. Lee (2021) observes that "international education tends to be narrowly understood by universities and professional associations as an educational rather than a geopolitical endeavor" (10). Of course, governments and private actors have long exploited international education for political or financial gain. Nearly nine decades ago, Josef Stalin explained, "Education is a weapon the effect of which is determined by the hands which wield it, by who is to be struck down" (Wells, 1934/2014). Indeed, during the half century that followed, the Soviet regime used international education as a key instrument to advance the Communist ideology abroad. Of course, the American government concurrently developed study programs for foreign nationals that it hoped would foster an appreciation for democratic capitalism (Tsvetkova, 2008). The ongoing decline of liberal democracy and ascent of authoritarianism is once again challenging international education by stoking fears about foreigners compromising national defense, meddling in domestic political processes, and displacing cultural heritage.

An important aspect of the new geopolitics is foreign interference in national affairs. The latest re-ordering of world power has set the West's teeth on edge. In the United States, especially since 2016, fears of injurious foreign interference have prompted government officials to impose policies that impact faculty, students, and administrators. The Department of Justice brought charges against American citizens for failing to disclose foreign research partnerships. The Department of State cancelled visas of international students with ties to

military-affiliated universities in their home countries. The Department of Education probed into universities' under-reported foreign donations. The Department of Defense rendered ineligible for funding any university that hosts a Confucius Institute. Indeed, many recent U.S. policies are responses to fears about China, specifically (viz., the China Initiative), but they could have a chilling effect on international education more broadly. Federal and state legislatures have introduced bills with bi-partisan support in response to perceived malign foreign influence on American higher education.

This phenomenon extends beyond the United States. The United Kingdom and Australia have also set up task forces to counter foreign interference in higher education. The European Union introduced a toolkit for member states to mitigate foreign interference in university-based research. India, Japan, Singapore, and other Asian nations have adopted foreign interference policies, too. In authoritarian regimes, where international higher education has been perceived as a threat to sovereignty, the consequences of perceived interference can be swift and substantial. Hungarian authorities, for example, forced Central European University out of the country by stripping it of its license to issue degrees. The American University of Afghanistan fled from the Taliban and now operates in exile as well.

Scholarship in this special issue highlights the apprehensions and actions of government leaders, policymakers, educators, and/or other key stakeholders about actual or perceived interference into their country's educational systems or institutions. Authors address a wide range of topics including news media coverage of foreign interference, international philanthropy, international research collaborations, and national security policy. When read together, they present a picture not often seen in international education research. Cross-cutting themes involve exploitation, vulnerability, and anxiety.

Kyle Long and Carly O'Connell map the international landscape of foreign interference in higher education by focusing on news coverage and policy formation. They bring together the concepts of sharp power and right-wing authoritarianism to inform a discourse analysis and comparative policy analysis of a data set of news articles and related media sources between 2019-2021. The

authors highlight how government actors within the United States and Australia are driving the international English-language discourse about Chinese foreign interference in a polarized media environment. Long & O'Connell 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. They find that government officials dominate the narrative of foreign interference. Academics are quoted considerably less. The authors' comparative analysis of allegations of foreign interference by country establishes a benchmark for future research.

Alexander Cooley, John Heathershaw, and Tena Prelec introduce readers to the concept of reputation laundering. Individuals, organizations, and countries can all launder their reputations by donating to prestigious universities. The authors suggest that higher education institutions are easily manipulated for such purposes because they do not have clear guidelines for accepting gifts that are legal but still risky. Using publicly available data, these scholars from the United States and United Kingdom highlight the patterns of foreign support of elite institutions. They remind us that even though these donations are substantial, they are almost certainly under-reported, suggesting the likelihood of even greater foreign influence in the American and British higher education sectors. A particularly significant contribution to the literature comes from the authors' detailed explanation of how laundering works.

Elise Ahn examines recent enforcement of long-standing U.S. policy on institutional reporting of foreign gifts and contracts. She uses discourse historical analysis to explore how the Trump administration framed the issues leading to new investigations of university non-compliance with federal statutes. Each investigation is premised on the belief that institutions under-reported foreign gifts. By focusing on the language of the investigation documents, Ahn finds that the government framed universities as negligent, inconsistent with peers, and lacking adequate infrastructure for their international activities. Her analysis reveals a racist and indiscriminate investigation scheme. Ahn convincingly argues that the federal government was fishing, looking at all international

activity as potentially malign, revealing that it did not understand institutions' commitments to comprehensive internationalization. She reminds scholars of international education to be vigilant and speak up about the use and abuse of international education, both foreign and domestic.

Roopa Trilokekar & Hani el Masry explore the inter-related concepts of public diplomacy, soft power, and national security vis-à-vis international education. By comparing Canada and the United States, they show how national security has become a more prominent rationale for international education at the expense of public diplomacy or soft power. Their study reviews the evolution of international education policy rationales through a review of policy documents and secondary literature as well as thirty key stakeholder interviews. This effort results in the development of a theoretical model to understand the relationship between public diplomacy and national security. They close with a discussion of policy implications that highlights several challenges in the years ahead, including the diminishing role of the university as a distinct and valued non-state actor. The authors see governments increasingly setting the rules of international academic engagement, pushing academics to the sidelines.

Ryan Allen & Yang Allen examine China's Thousand Talents Plan, the controversial recruitment scheme to repatriate Chinese citizens and enlist the services of foreign academics in elite universities to strengthen Chinese universities, especially in the applied sciences. Critics have alleged the scheme constitutes abuse of the international education sector's openness norms, even going so far as to posit it as a mechanism to facilitate espionage. The authors' turn their attention to the plan's effectiveness. Did it work? How much and what types of research were published? What institutional networks did it concentrate on? Using bibliometric data, Allen & Allen analyzed over 20,000 journal articles associated with the plan from 2008-2020. Research funded through the plan stopped growing and suddenly dipped in 2020. But they caution that that does not mean that similar recruitment efforts have been abandoned by the Chinese government—there are *still* partnerships between scholars. Yet at its height, associated research accounted for only one percent of total Chinese research. The authors do not see the relative paucity of publications alleviating concerns from

policymakers about espionage and technical theft. In fact, they worry about a deepening divide.

The contributions to this special issue collectively demonstrate that higher education is increasingly a venue for and instrument of foreign interference. Authors warn that both the interference itself and certain responses to it constitute significant threats to contemporary educational goals like economic mobility, social inclusion, and democratic citizenship. Indeed, foreign interference intersects higher education's competition phenomenon and diversity, education, and inclusion (DEI) agenda. Universities have become integral to a nation's security and economic productivity. Rivals therefore have incentive to steal or disrupt research and sow discord on campuses. But over-reactions are unfortunately too common. Public discourse and policy have enflamed xenophobia, racism, and a torrent of other societal ills. It may be that the 'foreign interference in higher education' narrative is an assault on higher education no less than the interference itself. This dynamic begs the question, to whom does higher education belong? Who has ultimate authority? Whose hands wield it?

The special issue suggests that the answer is less and less educational professionals. Two sets of authors—Long & O'Connell and Trilokekar & el Masry—present direct evidence of academics sidelined in public discourse and public policy when it comes to foreign interference. Allen & Allen show this indirectly, with a U.S. government agency—not a university—as the greatest partner to Chinese academics. Ahn underscores this dynamic by interpreting university and government values as incompatible. Cooley, Heathershaw, & Prelec remind us that it will be important to keep such power dynamics on our radar going forward. The special issue exhorts academics and other education professionals to regain control of the narrative on foreign interference to safeguard the autonomy of higher education.

Where can research on this topic go next? Authors in this issue engage theories and concepts from international relations and political science, but other disciplines and fields can expand our understanding even further. For example, the exploitation or weaponization of higher education for geopolitical gain is seldom chronicled and under-theorized. We do not know enough about its

psychological or societal impact. Researchers in psychology, sociology, and economics would have much to offer. There are numerous publicly available datasets on the China Initiative, foreign philanthropy, and other topics waiting to be analyzed. Network analysis and predictive models could be useful for informing public policy. As would studies on disinformation and strategic corruption on university campuses or within international education networks.

This special issue has its roots in a section of a graduate-level course on International Education and Public Diplomacy that I have been teaching at the George Washington University for the past few years. The course examines how nations use education as a tool of foreign relations. One of the central concepts in that course is soft power, the notion that countries can get what they want by being attractive (Nye, 2004). A nation's higher education system can contribute (or detract) from its soft power. The global communications consultancy Portland even uses the volume of inbound international students as a metric in its annual Soft Power Rankings. After the first year, though, the syllabus felt incomplete. Our news feeds seemed to suggest another path. Countries were getting what they wanted in higher education through manipulation and deception, too. Saudi Arabia had pulled scholarships from thousands of its citizens studying in Canada in retaliation to a perceived diplomatic slight. Russia had infiltrated a major American political party's ranks via a spy in the country on a student visa. So, I began to supplement our study of soft power with sharp power. This is the phenomenon that occurs when authoritarian regimes exploit asymmetrical freedoms to weaken the integrity of independent institutions (Walker, 2018). In education, it can take the form of weaponized enrollments, espionage, or censorship, among other practices. Balancing soft power with sharp power strengthened the course and opened new opportunities for scholarship.

I want to thank my students—especially Carly O'Connell, who co-authored our contribution to this issue—for their feedback and enthusiasm. Carly and other student members of a "malign foreign influence" research group were instrumental in shaping my understanding of concepts at the foundation of this issue. I am also grateful to the impressive lineup of authors represented in the issue. They demonstrated eagerness for the concept and worked diligently to share their

perspectives. I am impressed and inspired by them. The anonymous peer reviewers merit acknowledgment, too. Foreign interference is a relatively new topic, but the professionals we solicited for feedback took to it quickly and provided comments and questions that improved each of the entries that follow. Finally, I want to offer special thanks to Rosalind Raby, the journal's Editor-in-Chief, who also expressed early enthusiasm for the project and helped me to articulate its significance.

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