

White Paper: Higher Education & the National Interest

NATIONAL
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of SCHOLARS

Introduction

We understand our national interest to be the pursuit of the principles in the Declaration of Independence and Constitution so as to maximize American citizens' security, prosperity, and liberty. Our national interest, of course, includes taking account of the interests and intentions of other nations and understanding the civilizations and cultures of America's fellow nations, especially those of its Great Power peers. America's national interest has never settled into national isolation, but includes generous goodwill to the peoples of the West and the peoples of the world. Nor is *national interest* self-evidently defined: Americans always have debated, and always should debate, about the best ways to engage with our friends, with our foes, and with neutral parties.

Neither can America's national interest be walled off from America's national ideals—not least of which is the preservation of Western civilization, which, although America now forms its heartland, spreads far beyond our borders. We will want our colleges and universities to teach Americans foreign languages and the dynamics of global trade and migration, foreign constitutions, the ideals we share with other peoples, and the ideals that animate the peoples of the world who do not simply want to become imitation Americans. America's national interest includes the need to comprehend humanity's varied nations for what they are, in their common humanity and their civilizational distinctiveness.

Yet the American national interest is not identical with the interests of different nations and should not be subsumed under the pursuit of "global interest," "global welfare," or any other loosely defined abstraction that disguises the subordination of America's welfare to benefit foreigners. Higher education is an indispensable means by which to educate citizens to sustain America's national interest, to pursue their own vocations and well-being, and to pursue wisdom and truth. American higher education should serve the highest ideals of the West and of humanity, but as a complement to its foundational mission to serve American national interest and American citizens.

This statement is the common sense of centuries of American practice—and, indeed, of all countries that have founded universities in the near-millennium of their existence. The love of truth, the love of learning, always has married well with the interests of nations in preparing their citizens to serve the public welfare—first as priests, doctors, and lawyers, but in time as soldiers, scientists, teachers, and a host of other professions. American institutions of higher education have justified their claims for government support—their tax-free status, their host of subsidies—upon serving the national interest generally and American citizens individually. More broadly, American colleges and universities, over the generations, built a reservoir of goodwill among Americans by serving the national interest and American citizens.

Over the past half-century, America's educational institutions have steadily forfeited public goodwill by drifting away from their commitment to the nation's interests and the welfare of its citizens. Politicization has narrowed their mission from serving the country as a whole to advancing the agenda of

a small, radical faction. Equally damaging has been their growing financial dependence on foreign governments and students, whose tuition now sustains many struggling institutions. Some, such as those hosting Chinese-funded Confucius Institutes, have traded independence for money, becoming conduits of foreign influence.¹ Their unwillingness to confront the wave of anti-Jewish intimidation following Hamas's October 7, 2023, massacre stems in no small part from this same dependence on tuition from foreign students and donations from governments hostile to Jews and to Israel.²

This drift has also been partly associated with academia's deepening ideological hostility to America and Americans as a whole. Part of this hostility is expressed by teaching caricatures of American history and government that incite hatred of America, and by promulgating ideologies such as "settler colonialism" that delegitimize America. Another part is expressed by administrative actions by educational institutions, such as flouting immigration law by declaring themselves "sanctuary campuses," which refuse to cooperate with federal immigration law and enforcement officials. Universities' blithe willingness to allow majorities of their graduate students, and growing proportions of their undergraduate students and their faculty, to become foreign nationals registers the deracination of American higher education.

There is a sad irony in this development. In the optimistic decades after World War II, America opened its universities to foreign students, confident that exposure to our higher education would spread American values and foster goodwill abroad. For a time, it worked. But foreign governments soon recognized that higher education also could serve as a tool of their own soft power—and they began using American institutions to influence America itself. We should not abandon the ideals that inspired us to welcome ambitious students from around the globe. We should not abandon America's friendly interest in the West and in the world. Yet policymakers and citizens must no longer ignore how deeply foreign influence has deformed our universities. To restore their integrity, these institutions must be reoriented toward serving the American national interest. If academia wishes to regain the public's trust, it should pursue this reorientation willingly. If it refuses, policymakers must act on behalf of the American people to ensure that it does.

What follows is a catalogue of linked federal and state policy reforms that policymakers should enact to reorient American higher education toward the national interest and American citizens' welfare. These policies include:

- Mandate Transparency on Foreign Gifts
- Prevent Espionage by Administrative Reform
- Reduce Chinese Influence
- Reform Title VI Area Studies Grants
- End Lawbreaking by Foreign Students
- Close International Branch Campuses in Foreign Tyrannies
- Limit College Dependence on Foreign Student Admissions
- Limit College Dependence on Foreign Faculty and Administrators
- End Higher Education Defiance of Immigration Law
- Establish an Office of National Security in the Education Department

Again, it would be better for colleges and universities to make these changes of their own volition. But if they will not, then federal and state policymakers must take responsibility for these reforms.

Policies

Mandate Transparency on Foreign Gifts

Foreign states and organizations gain influence over America's educational institutions through gifts. These gifts are frequently given by means of "pass-through" intermediaries and just as frequently received by institutions controlled by colleges and universities, but formally distinct from them. These camouflaging tactics have vitiated the effectiveness of the existing laws on gift transparency—as has non-enforcement of these laws by bureaucrats in the Department of Education (ED). Although the Trump administration has strengthened enforcement of existing federal laws, policymakers should enact statutory reforms to ensure that American educational institutions disclose transparently the foreign gifts they receive and limit the total gifts they can receive from foreign sources.

Federal statutory reform for gift transparency broadly should resemble the proposed DETERRENT Act.³ The level of gift disclosure should be lowered radically, from \$250,000 to \$50,000. It also should address workarounds to avoid transparency that donors and universities have developed in recent decades: gift disclosure laws should apply to "pass-through" institutions operating on behalf of either foreign entities or institutions of higher education (IHEs). Gift disclosure laws also should apply to contracts, since contracts with foreign entities frequently camouflage gifts. The disclosure requirements should be far more detailed and require disclosure of the names of foreign donors and contractors, including a foreign government agency, as well as the particular individuals or departments at an IHE who receive gifts or enter into the contracts. They also should apply to registered foreign agents, apply to in-kind gifts, and require IHE's to disclose the purpose of a gift and any conditions attached to it. IHEs should be prohibited from receiving gifts or entering into contracts with foreign countries of concern or with foreign entities of concern without obtaining a waiver.⁴ The ED should maintain an electronic, publicly accessible database of all foreign gift disclosures. Finally, policymakers should enjoin the ED to investigate possible violations of these laws and penalize IHEs for each violation—where penalties may include losing eligibility for federal student financial aid.⁵

These final two stipulations are essential because the ED in previous administrations has enforced existing gift disclosure laws very laxly. The ED should be legally required to investigate violations of gift disclosure laws, and the American public and policymakers need a way to verify whether the ED actually is investigating such violations. Required investigation and a public database will reveal to the American public and policymakers when ED administrators fail to protect the American national interest regarding foreign gifts to our colleges and universities.

State governments can also enforce gift transparency laws on their public universities. 13 states currently possess legislation applying gift transparency to their IHEs; some of that legislation is weak, but it can be strengthened. Every state can and should enact legislation resembling the DETERRENT Act.⁶

Federal policymakers should consider further reforms to ensure IHEs comply with gift transparency laws. They might delegate enforcement of foreign gifts law to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). Policymakers might further require annual audits by the IRS of a set number of IHEs to confirm compliance with gift transparency laws.

The Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA) should also be amended to remove all exemptions for higher education.⁷ Existing FARA law should be enforced thoroughly, as should the extension of FARA law to previously exempt areas of higher education.

Federal policymakers finally should consider whether IHE noncompliance with gift transparency laws is so obdurate that the federal government should remove the financial incentives for IHEs to seek foreign gifts. They might do so by reducing the amount of federal funds given to an IHE by the same amount received from foreign sources. Federal policymakers should first seek to make gift transparency laws effective, but if IHEs continue their misconduct, federal policymakers will be justified in simply ending IHE dependence on foreign gifts.

Prevent Espionage by Administrative Reform

The ED should investigate and penalize educational institutions that tolerate foreign espionage or related illegal activities. While existing laws already prohibit such conduct, they are rarely enforced. What America needs most is not new rules, but the effective enforcement of the ones we have. To that end, the federal government should create a dedicated administrative unit to counter academic espionage. The Department of Justice's 2018–2022 "China Initiative," which targeted Chinese economic espionage in academia and private industry, provides a useful precedent. This new unit should be permanent, focused on higher education, and empowered to address threats from any foreign source, including agents of China, Russia, and Hamas. Whether housed in the FBI or elsewhere, it must operate in an agency that will prioritize its mission and avoid bureaucratic neglect. Policymakers might also consider legislation to encourage stronger self-regulation against foreign espionage within universities. But their foremost task is to ensure that existing laws are actually enforced.

Reduce Chinese Influence

The Chinese government has operated a targeted, effective campaign to steal American research and intellectual property, build soft power in strategic American institutions, and compromise key figures in American higher education. Policymakers should enact reforms to reduce Chinese influence on American IHEs.⁸ Federal statutory reform to reduce Chinese influence should resemble the proposed DHS Restrictions on Confucius Institutes and Chinese Entities of Concern Act.⁹ Policymakers should prevent federal funding of any IHE that has a relationship—including any form of direct or indirect financial support—with a Confucius Institute, Thousand Talents Program, or Chinese entity of concern. This prohibition should extend to possessing a branch campus in China or Hong Kong. Policymakers also should ensure that IHEs disclose *all* gifts from and contracts with the Chinese government, Chinese entities, or Chinese citizens.

China has also acquired financial leverage over IHEs through its supply of Chinese undergraduate and graduate students to American universities, whose tuition revenues have become a major source of direct support for IHEs, as well as a means for them to secure further support from American state and federal government programs. The large number of foreign students and contractors entering American IHEs also provides convenient cover for Chinese espionage agents, as well as for Chinese security personnel supervising Chinese students to ensure their continued loyalty to the Chinese regime. American policymakers should consider limiting or ending permission for universities to admit Chinese undergraduate

and graduate students. As a rule of thumb, American policymakers should determine how many Chinese students can be vetted reliably by our security agencies, and reduce the permissions we grant to Chinese students for study in America to that number. This measure will reduce Chinese espionage in America, and it will reduce the ability of the Chinese security services to pressure unwilling Chinese students in America to conform to China's tyrannous politics and to cooperate with its espionage campaigns.

American policymakers should establish a dedicated investigation of and opposition to Chinese espionage in higher education, but that is only one component of China's broader espionage campaign. Policymakers also should address Chinese espionage as a whole, by legislative investigations and dedicated units in our security bureaucracy—not least because we will not be able to remove Chinese espionage from American higher education until we have removed it from all of America.

Reform Title VI Area Studies Grants

Congress should reform Title VI area studies grants, especially those to Middle East Studies Centers, to require these programs to live up to their commitments to educate students capable and willing to support American foreign policy.¹⁰ Far too many area studies grants go to departments or institutions committed to opposition to the American national interest. Other grants go to departments or institutions that divert area studies grants to politicized courses that, at best, provide no value to the American national interest.

Policymakers should specify that no area studies grants may go to IHEs that institutionally boycott, or whose faculty or administrators boycott, national security-related scholarships. They also should specify that no area studies grant funds may be used for courses, workshops, events, or any other programs that deal primarily with American social or cultural issues, including multicultural experiences in America, unless they directly promote foreign language learning and advance the national security interests and economic stability of the United States.

If these measures do not suffice to reform area studies programs, especially Middle East Studies Centers, policymakers should consider ending public funding for them entirely. If these programs cannot be reformed to serve America's national interest, they should be terminated.

Policymakers also should consider whether to assign administration of area studies grants to the Department of War's Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center. Since area studies grants are intended to support American national security, it would make sense for the Department of War to administer these grants directly, rather than delegating this national security mission to the ED.

End Lawbreaking by Foreign Students

Far too many foreign students participated in a wave of Jew-hating intimidation on American college campuses in the months and years after Hamas' despicable mass murder of Israeli civilians on October 7, 2023. IHEs have failed to enforce the law against foreign students—not least because foreign students found guilty of breaking the law would have to be deported. Aside from their ideological sympathy for the Jew-hating rioters, IHEs also fear losing the income from foreign students' tuition. American policymakers must enact reforms to ensure that foreign students who break American law are deported from the United States.

Federal legislators should pass a law requiring IHEs to report foreign students who commit deportable offenses, as a condition of receiving federal funds. Federal funds also should be conditioned on IHEs

enforcing their own regulations against illegal conduct, especially their regulations against concealing their identity with face masks—upon all students, but explicitly including foreign students. Much of what IHEs should do to prevent and punish lawbreaking by foreign students is outlined in Columbia University’s July 2025 Resolution Agreement with the United States.¹¹ These laws should authorize a private right of action: any American citizen should have the right to sue IHEs for failing to comply with these laws and to punish lawbreaking by foreign students.

The federal government has already begun vetting the social media profiles of all visa applicants, including foreign students, and federal legislators should enact this measure into law.¹² As with Chinese students, American policymakers, as a rule of thumb, should determine how many foreign students can be vetted reliably by our security agencies and reduce the permissions we grant to foreign students for study in America to that number.

Federal legislators should also pass laws to align IHEs’ financial interests with thorough vetting of foreign student applicants, to ensure they do not admit likely lawbreakers. The federal government already requires foreign students to provide evidence of financial ability to cover tuition and living expenses while studying in America.¹³ Policymakers should build upon this precedent and require IHEs to provide \$100,000 into an escrow account for each foreign student they admit, to be forfeited to the federal government if the student is found to have broken American law. The universities would be allowed to require foreign students to provide part or all of the escrow funds. Such an escrow reform would give IHEs a strong financial incentive only to admit law-abiding foreign students.

Close International Branch Campuses in Foreign Tyrannies

In 2023, American colleges and universities operated 84 international branch campuses. These international branch campuses included 16 in China and Hong Kong, 6 in Qatar, and 3 in the United Arab Emirates.¹⁴ Such programs have historically provided universities with net income. Universities’ desire to preserve this profit source consequently gives foreign governments a means to exert influence on them. American universities must also compromise their championship of American liberties when they operate on the soil of foreign tyrannies.¹⁵

Federal policymakers should condition federal moneys to IHEs on their closing international branch campuses in foreign tyrannies. An IHE should be deemed ineligible for federal funds if it does not sever all institutional and financial ties with international branch campuses in undemocratic countries. International branch campuses should be authorized only in countries that the State Department certifies to the Education Department as ruled by a democratically elected government. Authorization for international branch campuses in a country should lapse automatically one year after the Department of Education last receives a certification from the Department of State that the country is ruled by a democratically elected government.

Policymakers also should investigate whether international branch campuses are used to “launder” money from foreign actors. At present, although in theory “universities must comply with anti-money laundering, Know-Your-Customer (“KYC”), and foreign gift disclosure obligations imposed by the federal government and the rules and regulations overseen by the United States Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control and Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (“FinCen”), the U.S. Department of Justice (“DOJ”), and the Department of Education (“ED”),” these laws have not been put into practical

effect.¹⁶ At present, there is no means for the public to oversee money transfers between American universities and their foreign branch campuses. Policymakers, building on the principles outlined in the Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education’s section on Foreign Entanglements, should regulate these money transfers to ensure they are transparent and easily subject to forensic audit.¹⁷

Limit College Dependence on Foreign Student Admissions

The mass admission of foreign students continues to pose risks to America’s national security and civic interests. Beyond espionage concerns, universities’ growing dependence on international tuition has shifted their priorities. Instead of serving American students and advancing the national interest, many institutions now cater to foreign markets to sustain their finances.

American higher education should exist first and foremost to educate American citizens—preparing them to fill essential roles in research, defense, medicine, education, and industry. A modest number of foreign students can enrich campus life and gain from exposure to American ideals, but the current imbalance has turned universities into instruments of foreign influence and sources of cheap labor for American businesses. Programs such as Optional Practical Training (OPT),¹⁸ which lack statutory authorization, effectively allow companies to replace American workers with foreign “students.” Federal policymakers should terminate OPT immediately.

To curb financial dependence on foreign tuition, lawmakers should define as “Foreign Serving Institutions” (FSIs) any colleges or universities that receive more than 20 percent of tuition revenue from international students—or more than five percent from students of a single foreign nation.¹⁹ Institutions also could be designated FSIs if more than five percent of their undergraduates or fewer than 35 percent of their graduate students are American citizens. Policymakers then could apply appropriate restrictions to FSIs, including loss of eligibility for federal funding.

State policymakers can apply a similar range of reforms to public universities, to limit their dependence on foreign tuition and foreign enrollment.²⁰

Federal and state governments also should revise funding formulas so that only American citizens count toward enrollment totals used to determine reimbursements. States can further reduce dependence on foreign students by reserving at least 82 percent of undergraduate seats for in-state residents, leaving the remainder to out-of-state and a limited number of international students—effectively capping foreign enrollment around 10 percent.²¹

Finally, both federal and state policymakers should strengthen English proficiency standards and national security vetting.²² Every foreign student admitted should possess near-native English fluency, particularly those serving as teaching assistants. Admission to study in the United States is a privilege, not a right—it should be granted only to students who demonstrate both linguistic competence and genuine goodwill toward the American republic and its values.

We should note here that the issue of foreign student admissions is bound up with the larger question of how government programs, although they were not intended for this purpose, facilitate *de facto* pathways for massive and permanent immigration. In 2024, it was estimated that 41% of foreign students remained in the United States long-term or permanently.²³ The number of foreign students who remain in America totals in the millions, and they, in turn, use legal mechanisms to bring in large numbers of family members. Foreign student admissions are the direct and indirect mechanism for a large portion of immigration to

America—although it was never intended for that purpose. While this matter does not formally fall into NAS’ higher education remit, we note that immigration reform will only be effective if it includes reform of foreign student admissions, by substantially reducing the number of foreign student admissions, eliminating the ability of foreign students to bring family members to the United States, and ensuring that foreign students return to their home countries when they finish their studies in America.

Limit College Dependence on Foreign Faculty and Administrators

The growing prevalence of foreign faculty and administrators in American higher education also poses risks to America’s national security and civic interests. Beyond espionage concerns, universities’ growing dependence on foreign faculty and administrators has shifted academic priorities away from America’s civic mission. It also takes away a considerable number of jobs from American citizens.

Federal policymakers should generally remove IHEs from eligibility to apply for employment visas for faculty or administrators, including for H-1B visas, Employment Based Immigration visas, and TN Status (Canada and Mexico). Exceptions should be made for EB-1 visas (“an alien of extraordinary ability, are an outstanding professor or researcher, or are a certain multinational executive or manager”²⁴) and short-term J-1 Exchange Visitors, and B-1 (Business) Visitors. Policymakers should require security agencies to vet the social media profiles of all visa applicants for faculty and administrative positions.²⁵

Federal policymakers should also remove the permission for colleges and universities to employ faculty and administrators in dual or joint appointments with foreign institutions.

End Higher Education Defiance of Immigration Law

American policymakers should end both the deluge of illegal aliens into America and the edifice of policies erected to render ineffective America’s border security policies and enforcement. Far too many colleges and universities have lent support to this lawless conduct by declaring themselves “sanctuary campuses” and by providing admission, employment, and/or financial support for illegal aliens.

American policymakers should not countenance this lawlessness. Certainly, they should end taxpayer support for lawless conduct by IHEs. Congress should enact legal and financial penalties for educational institutions that act as sanctuary campuses or provide any support for illegal aliens. Policymakers also should remove eligibility for federal funds to IHEs that admit or hire illegal aliens, operate formally or informally any “sanctuary campus” policies, and fail to cooperate fully and promptly with any request by the Department of Immigration and Nationalization. An IHE’s Board of Trustees or Regents should be required to certify annually, on pain of penalty for perjury, both that the college has complied fully with these requirements and that it has procedures in place to ensure continuing full compliance with these requirements. These laws should authorize private right of action: any American citizen should have the right to sue IHEs for failure to follow these laws.²⁶

State policymakers can enact a similar range of prohibitions against public IHEs declaring themselves or acting as “sanctuary campuses,” and against providing admission, employment, and/or financial support for illegal aliens.²⁷

Establish an Office of National Security in the Education Department

Federal policymakers should establish an Office of National Security (ONS) within ED, dedicated to addressing all these national security threats to American education. Any Office housed within the ED risks becoming ineffective, since the ED generally is and will be more interested in disbursing money than in preventing its disbursement. Nevertheless, a dedicated ONS would provide a useful administrative home to focus on all these challenges that American higher education present to America's interests and national security.

Should federal policymakers terminate ED, *de facto* or *de jure*, the ONS for higher education should be relocated to the Justice Department. If the ED is terminated, all the other measures we recommend to be administered by ED also should be transferred to the Justice Department, or to another appropriate federal administrative unit.

Conclusion

All these reforms will help ensure that American higher education once more serves the American national interest and American citizens. Each of them is a worthy goal in and of itself. Colleges should welcome international students, but they also should hold them to the same academic standards as other students, including proficiency in English. Colleges should focus on the undergraduate and graduate education of American citizens and reduce their dependence upon foreign sources for tuition and staffing. Colleges should protect American intellectual property and national security and ensure that they do not facilitate espionage by China and other rival nations directed toward economically and militarily valuable technology and research by welcoming foreign students and researchers. Colleges should prevent lawbreaking by foreign students and not engage in lawless conduct themselves by acting as “sanctuary campuses” for illegal aliens.

Above all, America's colleges and universities should cherish America and want to aid its national interest. The reforms we propose here would remove many of the strings by which foreign powers exert influence on our educational institutions, but they would not by themselves restore to American higher education an instinctive love of country. Other reforms are needed for that transformation—and not all of them can be effected by our federal and state governments. But these reforms will remove the shackles of dependence that prevent our institutions of higher education from resuming the patriotic spirit that should be their second nature. American policymakers will do great service by these acts of liberation, even if much work remains to be done to rededicate our deracinated colleges and universities to the American nation.

All this should be done—without abandoning America's larger commitment to know and to engage in friendly relations with the brotherhood of nations. Our colleges and universities will continue to play an essential role in that fundamental American goal. The reforms we propose will reunite American academia with the American nation, so that both may participate properly in the intellectual and spiritual communications of the West and the world. An American academy united with America's people will have something unique to say when it speaks to the world.

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