

Policy Brief: Confucius Institutes

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Since 2004, the Chinese government has planted Confucius Institutes at colleges and universities around the world—including more than 60 in the United States and roughly 500 Confucius Classrooms at the K-12 level.¹

What are Confucius Institutes?

Confucius Institutes are campus centers set up as partnerships between an American college or university and a Chinese university to teach Chinese language and culture. They are funded by the Chinese Communist Party.

Why are Confucius Institutes a problem?

The State Department has found that these Institutes “exert malign influence on U.S. campuses and disseminate CCP propaganda.”² Because they allow the Chinese government to control what is taught about China, they threaten the academic freedom and integrity of American educational institutions. They also make these institutions financially dependent on China. What’s more, Confucius Institutes benefit China at the expense of the U.S by providing China an entrée into American research and technology. The FBI has taken “investigative steps” looking into Confucius Institutes and their “nontraditional collectors” who are suspected of espionage.

Chinese influence is also compromising American K-12 education: The Chinese government has collaborated with the College Board, best known for the SAT, to create the A.P. Chinese Language and Culture course and exam. The College Board also recruited schools to sign up for Confucius Classrooms and other Confucius Institute programs.

1 Christopher Wray, testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Intelligence, Hearing on “Worldwide Threats,” February 13, 2018. <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/hearings/open-hearing-worldwide-threats-0>.

2 “Letter From Under Secretary Keith Krach to the Governing Boards of American Universities,” U.S. Department of State, August 18, 2020. <https://www.state.gov/letter-from-under-secretary-keith-krach-to-the-governing-boards-of-american-universities/>. See also Michael R. Pompeo, “Designation of the Confucius Institute U.S. Center as a Foreign Mission of the PRC,” U.S. Department of State, August 13, 2020. <https://www.state.gov/designation-of-the-confucius-institute-u-s-center-as-a-foreign-mission-of-the-prc/>.

The Facts

- **Chinese Control.** A Chinese government-backed agency, the Chinese International Education Foundation, not only provides funding for Confucius Institutes but also selects the teachers, provides textbooks, and approves class content.
- **Kindergarten to College.** Confucius Classrooms begin in elementary schools, including immersion programs where teachers selected by the Chinese government teach not only language but also subjects such as history.

The Findings

- **Weapons of Soft Power.** Confucius Institutes import Chinese government censorship into American college campuses, especially regarding the Tiananmen Square Massacre and the status of Taiwan and Tibet.
- **Intellectual Freedom Compromised.** Official Confucius Institute policies require adherence to Chinese law, including speech codes.
- **Espionage.** The FBI has reported evidence of espionage at Confucius Institutes. China also uses Confucius Institutes to monitor Chinese students in the U.S.
- **Entanglement.** In addition to paying for teachers, textbooks and operating costs, Confucius Institutes fund study abroad scholarships for American students; they also provide all-expenses-paid overseas trips for college presidents and administrators who enjoy state-sponsored dinners and other perks.
- **Cornering the Language Market.** The Chinese government not only provides Chinese teachers and textbooks to American schools but also, by partnering with the College Board, trains American teachers of Chinese as well.

Recommendations

- Confucius Institutes should close **immediately**. Since 2014, 55 schools have shut down their Confucius Institutes.
- Federal and local governments should protect American education by **conditioning funding on the closure** of an institution's Confucius Institute or Classroom.
- The Higher Education Act (Section 117) should **demand more transparency**. Require disclosures of foreign gifts in any amount (eliminating the \$250,000 threshold), increase penalties for noncompliance, and require that colleges disclose any contracts they sign with foreign governments, agents, or entities. Require similar transparency from K-12 schools.
- **Encourage competitors to the College Board**, which does not deserve its near-monopoly.

Further reading:

- Rachele Peterson, *Outsourced to China: Confucius Institutes and Soft Power in American Higher Education* <https://www.nas.org/reports/outsourced-to-china> & *Corrupting the College Board: Confucius Institutes and K-12 Education* <https://www.nas.org/reports/corrupting-the-college-board> (National Association of Scholars, 2017 & 2020).

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