
Latitudes: Tensions with China are hurting U.S. science. A new paper explains how.

1 message

Karin Fischer <newsletter@newsletter.chronicle.com>

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Latitudes

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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How geopolitical tensions disrupt research and talent

Tensions between the United States and China have disrupted international

scientific collaboration, as well as the mobility of graduate students and early-career researchers, and led to reduced productivity among scientists of Chinese descent in America.

A newly published [working paper](#) examines the fallout as relations between the two countries deteriorated between 2016 and 2019, and finds that the impact on science is multidimensional: The number of ethnically Chinese international students studying in doctoral programs in the United States dropped by 16 percent, and those who did come were less likely to stay in the United States after they earned their degrees.

Over the same period, Chinese citations of American science declined sharply. And the productivity of researchers of Chinese descent in the United States decreased between 2 and 6 percent, amid growing anti-Chinese sentiment.

“Increasing isolationism and geopolitical tension lead to reduced talent and knowledge flows between the U.S. and China, which are likely to be particularly damaging to international science,” the authors conclude. “The effects on productivity are still small but are likely to only grow as nationalistic and isolationist policies also escalate. The results as a whole strongly suggest the presence of a ‘chilling effect.’”

The paper, published by the National Bureau of Economic Research, was written by Britta Glennon, an assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania, and Raviv Murciano-Goroff, an assistant professor at Boston University, along with two Ph.D. students, Robert Flynn of BU and Jiusi Xiao of Claremont Graduate University.

It is the latest research exploring the effects of the rift in one of the world’s most important scientific relationships. A [2022 paper](#) found that American research collaboration with China fell after the start of the [China Initiative](#), the Trump administration’s investigation of academic and economic espionage. Scholars of Chinese descent

[reported](#) that they were less likely to seek federal funding for research projects or to engage with academics in China because of fears of racial profiling in the current environment. Chinese-born scientists who began their careers in the United States [returned to China](#) in larger numbers in recent years.

Such academic decoupling is worrisome, Glennon and her colleagues note, because science has become more and more global. The percentage of science and engineering doctoral degrees granted by American colleges to foreign-born students has nearly doubled since the 1980s, and research papers with authors from more than one country account for 23 percent of worldwide publications and 40 percent of American publications.

Bilateral academic connections with China are also deep. A quarter of American scientific papers have a Chinese co-author, and Chinese students account for about a third of all foreign students in American STEM doctoral programs.

Recent policy changes, however, have sought to loosen those global academic ties. In addition to the China Initiative, former [President Donald J. Trump](#), who is again the presumptive Republican nominee, placed visa restrictions on Chinese graduate students and canceled the Fulbright exchange program with mainland China and Hong Kong during his time in office. But authors contend that anti-China sentiments that erode academic collaboration began earlier than Trump's election.

Nor are the changes one-sided. China has also adopted a more nationalist approach to science, creating programs to attract Chinese-born academics home, decreasing incentives for professors to publish in international journals, and stepping up efforts to poach intellectual property from abroad.

The documented impact, as reflected in CV and publication data, has been immediate. The share of Chinese papers citing American research fell between 4 and 6 percent after 2016, and the decline is more pronounced in recently published articles — although American scientists have continued to cite Chinese research. Of the Chinese students who study elsewhere or who leave after graduation, most go to other anglophone countries.

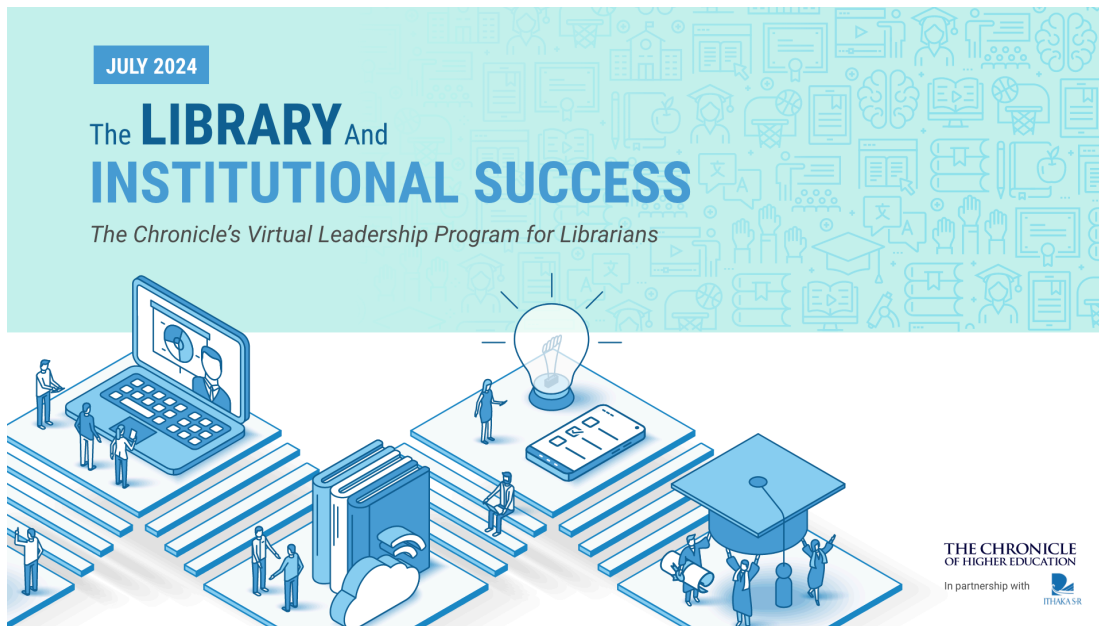
The authors acknowledge that cutting off international collaboration in certain areas may be appropriate because of the military or national-security uses of some research.

Their findings have implications for current policy debates. Florida passed a [law](#) last year that restricts public colleges in the state from hiring graduate assistants or visiting scholars from China and other “countries of concern.” It’s now being challenged in court. And the United States and China are struggling over whether to renew a 45-year-old pact governing scientific collaboration.

“As isolationism and geopolitical tensions beyond these two countries continue to increase around the world,” the authors write, “our results provide a compass regarding expected broader effects on talent and knowledge flows.”

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What a Supreme Court decision on federal regulations means for international education

A decision by the U.S. Supreme Court to limit the broad regulatory authority of federal-government agencies could open the door to new threats to optional practical training, the popular work program for foreign graduates of American colleges.

The **ruling** last week overturned a longstanding legal precedent known as Chevron deference, which gives administrative agencies discretion in interpreting ambiguous laws. It could make it much easier for opponents of federal rules to challenge them in court.

The decision applies to federal regulation of all sorts of areas, including food safety, the financial sector, and fisheries. But immigration and visa policy could be especially affected. That's because Congress hasn't passed meaningful legislation on the hot-button issue in many years, meaning that changes to the law to meet evolving needs have come through regulation.

Fanta Aw, executive director and chief executive of NAFSA: Association of International Educators, expressed disappointment in the ruling. "It effectively undercuts federal-agency expertise and hampers a proven method for resolving unclear aspects of the law through regulation," she said.

Aw said the decision could also have some positive effects, such as making it easier to push back on more-restrictive policies on international students and scholars.

OPT, which was established more than 30 years ago through administrative interpretation of student-visa law, could be among the biggest targets in international education for reassessment in the new legal environment. Opponents have repeatedly tried to eliminate the program, criticizing it as an example of bureaucratic overreach. In fact, the most recent court decision to uphold OPT rested, in part, on Chevron deference.

In the Supreme Court opinion, Chief Justice John Roberts wrote that the decision did not mean that previous cases that relied on the precedent had to be overturned. It could, however, lead to new legal challenges.

Miriam Feldblum, executive director of the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, noted that the court decision itself makes no changes to the program, and students will continue to be able to participate in and apply for OPT.

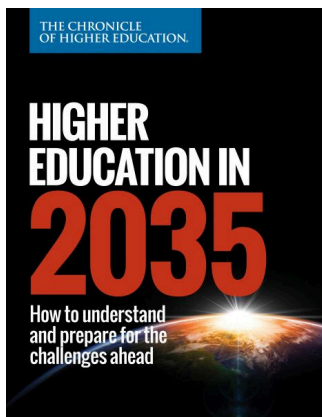
Feldblum and Aw called OPT a key component of student learning, giving international students, who have strict work restrictions as a condition of their visas, the opportunity for hands-on experience. It's [popular](#) with foreign students — one in five student-visa holders in the United States is taking part in OPT.

“Having predictable pathways for international students to apply their learning in the workplace is both a clear part of the educational journey and vitally important if the U.S. is to remain the top destination for the world’s best talent,” Feldblum said.

Aw said that the ruling made it even more important for Congress to move forward on immigration and visa policy. NAFSA and the Presidents’ Alliance are part of a [new coalition](#) advocating for policies that better serve international students.

You can read my [analysis](#) from when the case was first argued. My colleague Amanda Friedman has an [explainer](#) about the potential impacts to other aspects of higher education, including Title IX, student-debt relief, and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, the program that gives legal protection to undocumented students and others who were brought to the United States as children.

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House rejects proposals to cut international exchanges

Efforts in the U.S. House to slash funding for educational and cultural exchange programs have been [defeated](#).

Bipartisan majorities rejected two amendments to the State Department spending bill that would have cut money for exchanges run by the department. A third proposal would have [eliminated all funding](#) for international-education programs, including the flagship Fulbright program, the Gilman scholarship program to send first-generation and low-income students abroad, and EducationUSA, a global network of centers that advise international students about studying at American colleges. It was withdrawn before a vote was taken.

The bill, which was approved by the House, allocates \$721 million for academic exchanges.

Comments, and more comments, on international students

Nicholas Burns, the U.S. ambassador in Beijing, said China has made it harder for its students to study at American colleges. He [accused](#) the Chinese government of rescinding invitations for diplomatic staff to promote American higher education at college fairs across the country. Half of

Chinese participants chosen for U.S.-funded exchange programs have pulled out in the past two years because of pressure from authorities and others.

In an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, Burns seemed to suggest that anti-American sentiment among the Chinese public, stoked by the government, may have led to the [stabbing](#) of four visiting Iowa college instructors last month. And he refuted charges that Chinese students are being stopped and “[harassed](#)” at the U.S. border, saying that almost all visa holders clear customs without incident.

Meanwhile, Burns’s State Department colleague Kurt Campbell, the deputy secretary of state, told a Washington think tank that the United States should welcome more students from China — but in the [humanities and social sciences](#), not in science. The second-ranking State Department official cited national-security worries and concerns about theft of expertise, and called for the United States to instead recruit more Indian students to study science and technology.

“I would like to see more Chinese students coming to the United States to study humanities and social sciences, not particle physics,” Campbell said.

Campbell wasn’t the only one with opinions on international students. In an [interview](#) with *The New York Times* columnist David Brooks, Steve Bannon, a former Trump political strategist, said the number of foreign students at American colleges should be cut by “50 percent immediately.”

Bannon, who spoke with Brooks before beginning a four-month prison term for ignoring a congressional subpoena, said students from abroad are blocking Americans from underrepresented groups from getting training and jobs in high-tech fields.

“We should staple an exit visa to their diploma,” Bannon said. “The foreign students can hang around for a week and party, but then they got to go home and make their own country great.”

Around the globe

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security will grant emergency-employment authorization to students affected by the unstable political and security situation in [Haiti](#) to allow them to work more hours and take fewer courses than is typically permitted under visa rules. The special waiver will be in effect until February 2026.

Pennsylvania's Senate has passed a bill that would block state aid from going to any college that [boycotts or divests from Israel](#).

Canada will no longer allow international students to apply for postgraduation work permits at its [international borders](#), a practice that circumvented longer visa wait times but caused more delays for other travelers entering the country.

Australia has more than doubled the [fees](#) charged for student visas.

A pair of new reports sound an alarm on British universities' [dependence](#) on revenue from international students' tuition.

European Commission officials said if universities and researchers [suspend](#) EU-funded projects with Israeli colleagues because of their nationality, it could be considered discrimination.

A special rapporteur called on the United Nations and its member states to adopt stronger principles for protecting [academic freedom](#) around the world.

I talked with the [Pulse Check Series](#) podcast about international-student recruitment trends.

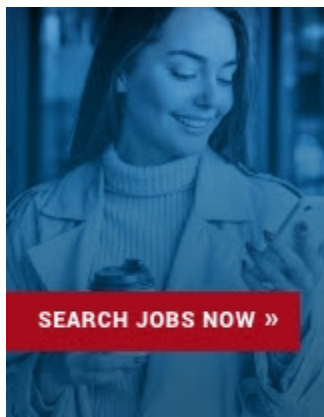
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