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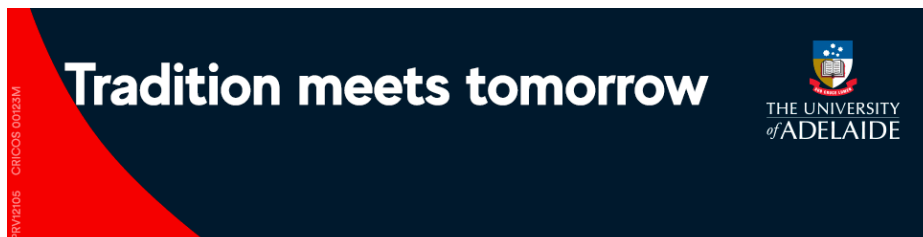
**Latitudes: In America, higher education has become a political flashpoint. Around the world, too.**

1 message

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# Latitudes

THE CHRONICLE  
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## Backlash against higher education is a “global phenomenon”

You might've heard: There's a presidential election coming up.

For *The Chronicle's* [U.S. election-issue cover story](#), I took a look at the increasingly contentious and polarized debate around higher education. As one source told me, whether it's tuition costs or the culture wars, “everyone can find a reason to be pissed off” at colleges.

But the politicalization of higher ed is far from uniquely American. In fact, the United States is late to the party, said Eve Darian-Smith, chair of global and international studies at the University of California at Irvine.

Darian-Smith [studies the backlash against higher education](#) by conservative governments and groups around the world. “We're

playing catch-up on a global attack,” she told me. “The U.S. is sort of the last to wake up to what is a global phenomenon.”

Bradford Vivian, a communications professor at Pennsylvania State University, said a “conscious campaign” against higher education started earlier in countries like Brazil, [China](#), [Hungary](#), and [Russia](#).

Criticism of college is a global contagion, and detractors from around the world are linked, said Vivian, author of [Campus Misinformation: The Real Threat to Free Speech in American Higher Education](#). Sen. JD Vance of Ohio, the Republican vice-presidential nominee, has praised Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary, who has cracked down on civil society and tried to shut down a prominent liberal-arts institution, [Central European University](#). When it comes to dealing with campus dissent, Vance [has said](#), Orbán has made “some smart decisions there that we could learn from in the United States.” Christopher Rufo, the right-wing campus provocateur, has been a visiting fellow at the Orbán-affiliated Danube Institute, which advocates “conservative and national values and thinking.”

What is it about higher education? Darian-Smith and others make the point that colleges play multiple roles in society: They educate the next generation. They are sources of expertise. The ideas they generate often frame how the public sees the world.

Vivian argues that the pluralism and dissent on college campuses can seem unsettling to authoritarian, or authoritarian-lite, leaders.

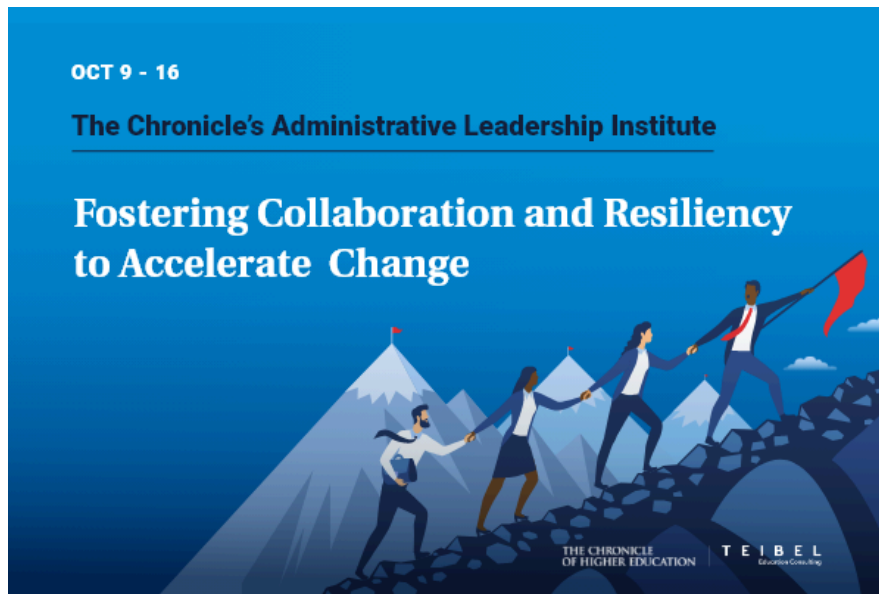
“Universities aren’t perfectly democratic but they are more so” than many institutions, Vivian said, noting that, in the United States and many countries, the share of women and students who are underrepresented minorities has increased. “Higher education represents multicultural democracy, and there’s pushback to multicultural democracy.”

Of course, in the United States, outright antagonism from the right can eclipse the fact that Democrats too increasingly find fault with college. [Read more](#) about the two parties’ different diagnoses of what ails higher ed and, if elected, how they might remedy it.

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## “A benign appearance but a real problem”

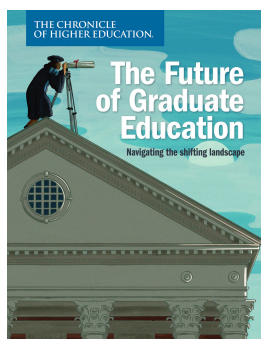
As part of my recent reporting, I also spoke with Peter W. Wood, president of the National Association of Scholars. If NAS sounds familiar to you — well, it should: The organization, which has long criticized colleges for promoting liberal political agendas, has sounded an alarm about Chinese influence on American campuses, in particular about [Confucius Institutes](#).

“Relentless” is Wood’s own characterization of his group’s efforts against the Chinese-funded language and cultural centers. He and other critics have argued that the institutes are used for propaganda purposes by the Chinese government and that they could be used to collect intelligence, including proprietary information and intellectual property. “They have a benign appearance but are a real problem,” Wood said.

Today, Confucius Institutes have all but disappeared from American colleges, but Wood said NAS has other concerns about higher education's China ties. They include foreign grants and contracts to American colleges and "agents of China who [harass Chinese students](#)" studying in the United States, "and do so with impunity," he said.

[Here's more about geopolitics and the American campus.](#)

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## Around the globe

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**China's first lady, Peng Liyuan, told** a visiting group of American students in Beijing that it was important to have more student exchanges between China and the United States to nurture a "[tree of friendship](#)."

**Despite deep concerns about relations** between the United States and China, a survey of Chinese Americans found that four of five believe that the two countries can still [cooperate on exchange programs](#).

**The U.S. ambassador to India, Eric Garcetti, said** there should be more opportunities for American students to [study in India](#).

**Israeli universities are** increasingly [isolated](#) as international-research collaboration has dipped and foreign-student numbers have declined since the start of the war with Hamas.

**Universities in Central and Eastern Europe are** particularly at risk from [brain drain](#), according to a survey by the European University Association.

**Interference from funding agencies** like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund is undercutting [Nigeria's higher-education system](#), a university administrator charged.

**“Should we reserve more spots for American citizens** at our best universities? Does turning American universities into global educational centers undermine its critical function to inculcate American values in our future American elite?” asks this [provocative podcast](#).

I'm traveling this week but always welcome your feedback and ideas for future reporting. Drop me a line at [karin.fischer@chronicle.com](mailto:karin.fischer@chronicle.com) or connect with me on [X](#) or [LinkedIn](#). If you like this newsletter, please share it with colleagues and friends. They can [sign up here](#).

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