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Regulatory Update

Congressional Warnings to American Universities Signal Greater Scrutiny Over PRC-Linked Programs

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Congress is deepening its scrutiny of U.S. universities that have academic partnerships with Chinese institutions, emphasizing concerns over national security and the use of federal research funding. A series of congressional warning letters sent to several prominent universities has spurred swift institutional action and highlighted the growing risks faced by America's institutions of higher education.

Congressional Pressure and Institutional Response

Earlier this year, the chairs of the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party and the House Education and Workforce Committee, John Moolenaar (R-MI) and Tim Walberg (R-MI), issued letters to Oakland University, Eastern Michigan University and the University of Detroit Mercy. These communications expressed deep concerns over the schools' partnerships with Chinese universities linked to advanced military technologies.

Central to the letters were references to dual-use research, federal grant funding and ties to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the People's Republic of China's (PRC) military-industrial system. Similarly, this past October, Chairman John Moolenaar sent a similar letter to the University of Michigan urging the school to close its joint institute with Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU).

The University of Michigan responded quickly. After receiving the letter in October 2024, officials announced in early 2025 that they would terminate their longstanding joint institute with SJTU. In doing so, the University of Michigan joined Georgia Tech and the University of California, Berkeley, who had already severed academic ties with Chinese institutions following congressional pressure. This decisive action signals a realization that academic collaboration, especially when financed with U.S. taxpayer dollars, must be evaluated through a strategic-security lens.

Likewise, Oakland University and Eastern Michigan University announced that they would wind down China-based joint ventures by March 2025, following pressure from Congress. The University of Detroit Mercy, while still reviewing its program engagements, has signaled its full intention to comply with similar expectations. All three universities noted that their China-based partnerships were merely educational and did not involve any research or technology transfer.

Joint Ventures Under the Microscope

Congressional scrutiny of the nexus between China and American universities has focused on:

1. **Technology Transfer and Military Integration**

The lawmakers cite case studies in which U.S.-PRC linked institutes, using expertise and technology developed through federally-funded research, have enabled the PRC to achieve significant technological advances. In particular, the letters express concern over the transfer of sensitive U.S. technology and research in support of the PRC's defense industry and military modernization efforts.

2. **Military Training and Ideological Indoctrination**

The letter to the University of Michigan references efforts by the university's joint institute to support the PLA. The letter cites requirements for students involved in the joint institute to engage in mandatory military training, combining physical drills with ideological education. Further, the letter suggests that this military structure extends into academics through a mandatory sequence of political courses including "Military Theory" and "Mao Zedong Thought."

3. **Foreign Influence and Propaganda**

The letter to the University of Michigan raises concerns that its joint institute with SJTU serves as a hub for PRC talent development and recruitment, particularly when students go on to study further on the Michigan campuses. The letter also cites federal charges filed against five individuals from the university's joint program who were found on an unauthorized visit to a military training site in northern Michigan.

Why This Matters: A Warning Shot to Higher Ed

While these warning letters do not announce a formal investigation, their tone and detail suggest that Congress may be laying the groundwork for more aggressive action, particularly around federal funding. The explicit references to the receipt of federal funding and the defense origins of certain technologies serve as a pointed warning.

More broadly, the letters represent an escalation in Congress's approach to academic partnerships and broader engagement with China by American universities. Congress's focus is no longer limited to Confucius Institutes or individual faculty members. Large-scale joint ventures, foreign campuses and institutional partnerships, especially with PRC-designated entities, are now in the crosshairs.

National Security Meets Higher Education

These latest developments bring into sharp focus the evolving intersection between congressional oversight, higher education and national security. Institutions have already been considering the values of academic freedom, freedom from viewpoint discrimination and academic independence when they operate internationally. The committees' renewed scrutiny underscores that in addition to these academic concerns, geopolitical considerations, defense affiliations and security risks arising from the commercialization of university-owned patents will increasingly shape their engagement models and compliance expectations.

While academic freedom and global collaboration remain vital, universities will be expected to account for how foreign partnerships, particularly those involving PRC institutions, interact with U.S. strategic interests, research integrity and taxpayer-funded innovation.

Institutional Adjustments in a New Policy Environment: Next Steps

Universities must now navigate more than traditional compliance obligations. The emerging oversight landscape demands comprehensive institutional strategies, including:

- **Foreign Partnership Audits:** Review all active and planned collaborations with PRC-based partners to assess national security risk.

- **Grant-Funding Risk Analysis:** Identify federally-funded research projects that may intersect with higher-risk foreign collaborations, particularly in sensitive areas like AI, materials science or surveillance.
- **Formal Governance Structures:** Implement review boards or compliance committees to oversee foreign partnerships, research protocols, export controls and intellectual property safeguards.
- **Congressional Engagement Preparedness:** Build protocols for responding to congressional requests, including structured timelines, leadership briefings and media communication plans.
- **Transparent Documentation:** Maintain records of decision-making and mitigation measures to support responsible institutional behavior if public scrutiny escalates.

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