

“Fiat Lux: Let There Be Light”

The University of California’s founding principle enshrines the open pursuit of new fundamental knowledge, to be shared globally. Fundamental research thrives on international collaboration; it would be a tragedy to compromise this, particularly given such pressing societal challenges as climate change, which can only be effectively addressed globally.

I am deeply concerned about the recent investigations into foreign influence in our universities. Collaboration with Chinese researchers appears to be an invitation for an investigation. During my time as the Vice Chancellor for Research at the University of California, Berkeley, I asked my Berkeley Chinese-American colleagues to share with me incidents of harassment they knew of or had experienced. They reported occurrences of suspended funding for investigators who had collaborated with Chinese universities. They believe that faculty with Chinese collaborators have received increased scrutiny of their grants for disclosure violations. There are indications that proposals submitted by Chinese-American researchers are subjected to a more intensive review. It has also been reported that the funding success rate for Asian-American investigators is lower than for their Caucasian colleagues. This Study suggests that these observations, deeply troubling in themselves, may relate to a broader national issue.

In one case, a Federal agency informed me of its suspicion that one of our faculty had a significant affiliation with an institute in China, and that we should investigate it as a conflict of commitment. I did what any academic would do, and performed an extensive Google search for the Institute and our faculty member’s name. Other than a large number of co-authored publications, all of which had appeared in the open literature, I found no suspicious affiliation. I reported my finding to the agency. They responded by producing a set of web page screen images, which I had been unable to access, that suggested the individual did have an affiliation with the institute in question. It was never made clear to me how the agency was able to navigate to these pages, or why they had not shared this information initially. I believe the affiliation was honorific – not unlike a visiting professor – and did not suggest a conflict of commitment. The agency then requested that I investigate whether the faculty member had received duplicate funding from China for work that had already been federally funded, in clear violation of agency rules. After extensive investigation, I concluded that the collaborative work performed with Chinese colleagues was independent of work performed under U.S. sponsorship. The agency remained unconvinced by the evidence I provided.

As we are aware from press reports, there have been researcher abuses, particularly in terms of excessive time spent abroad or payments received that have gone unreported. Those who have violated either university or government rules should be punished. In my case, at the very worst the faculty member had omitted to disclose collaborations with Chinese colleagues or to report

the related but independent work they were pursuing. To avoid the displeasure of the agency, which holds sway over funding decisions that can make or break a researcher's career, the faculty member agreed to forgo submitting a proposal for a time.

Let me state emphatically that I support all Federal agency disclosure rules. As Vice Chancellor, my office did everything to communicate these requirements to our research community, and to assist our researchers in being in compliance. Nonetheless, the Federal agencies have not been entirely clear and consistent on the rules about disclosure, which are now being clarified.

These investigations have been conducted in a manner that does not adhere to our American values: an open and transparent process, an assumption of innocence until proven guilty, and the right of appeal.

There is little doubt that these investigations have had a particular focus on Chinese-American researchers. In my story, the faculty member is Chinese-American, born in China, yet whose scientific career has been almost entirely in the U.S. This person first came under suspicion because of the number of co-authored papers with Chinese researchers. This is hardly surprising, given the language and cultural familiarities, as well as the reality that for some fields of science, the best researchers and resources are to be found in China. This was the case for this researcher. We learn as much from researchers in China as they learn from us. Let me emphasize that the joint work was not secret, but appeared as publications in the open venues of science.

This faculty member's experience is not unique. The Federal agencies have undertaken hundreds of similar investigations – no one really knows the numbers. Some have resulted in job dismissals and legal indictments. What we don't know are those investigations that were inconclusive, or represented little more than errors of omission, or ended with complete exoneration. The agencies know this; the public only the most sensational – and typically most egregious – cases.

These investigations and related actions – such as the increased interrogation of Chinese American researchers by Customs and Border Patrol officers at airports – have resulted in a chilling effect on our Chinese-American research community in particular, and America's international collaborations and our continued ability to attract the world's best and brightest. Much of America's scientific and technical workforce in our leading institutions are Americans originally from China. My university has seen a decline in graduate students, postdoctoral scholars, and visiting students from China that began even before the Covid-19 pandemic. Closing off such a tremendous source of technical talent will have ramifications for America's research enterprise for many years to come. Fundamental research is a global activity. We depend on a global workforce. We depend on global collaborations.