

SENTINEL RESEARCH SOCIETY

Washington, DC

Research Proposal

Title: *Addressing the PRC Intelligence Threat to Academia*

Principal Investigator (PI)

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Research Team Composition

Graduate Research Assistant

Lucy Mathews

- **Role:** Graduate Student Research Assistant, Sentinel Research Society
- Coordinates literature review and case study synthesis
- Oversees intern work product review and consistency
- Manages research deliverables and editorial integrity
- Weekly Commitment: 5–7 hours/week

Undergraduate Research Interns (10)

- Disciplines: International Affairs, National Security, Political Science, Intelligence Studies
 - Roles: Data collection, case analysis, outreach strategy drafting, visual aid design
 - Weekly Commitment: 5–7 hours/week per intern
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Abstract

This project, led by the Sentinel Research Society, addresses the increasing threat posed by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) intelligence services to U.S. academic institutions. PRC efforts to infiltrate and influence American academia—through talent recruitment, institutional partnerships, and intellectual property theft—pose a long-term risk to national competitiveness and strategic innovation. Despite this, many academic leaders and researchers remain unaware of the nature, scope, or implications of these activities.

This six-month research initiative aims to (1) clearly frame the threat; (2) identify solutions for raising awareness; and (3) develop educational materials and pilot engagement strategies for academic institutions. The research will draw on open-source intelligence, government reports, and expert consultation. By bridging the gap between national security and academic cultures,

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this project will support a scalable model for strategic communication and CI awareness in higher education.

1. Introduction & Background

Academic institutions in the United States face an evolving and often misunderstood counterintelligence threat. The PRC views higher education as a critical access point for knowledge acquisition, technological advancement, and soft-power projection. Leveraging the openness of academic systems, PRC intelligence services have engaged in strategic recruitment, research co-option, and institutional influence.

Despite this, counterintelligence awareness within academia remains uneven and often politically sensitive. This project seeks to craft an academically grounded, politically neutral framework to convey the national security implications of PRC activity without alienating the audience or reducing credibility.

2. Research Questions and Objectives

Primary Research Question:

- How can U.S. academic institutions be effectively educated about the PRC intelligence threat in a way that motivates awareness and institutional change?

Secondary Questions:

- What patterns exist in PRC targeting of academic sectors and disciplines?
- Why has the threat failed to resonate with many institutional leaders?
- What narrative, tone, and delivery methods are most effective for raising CI awareness in academic settings?

Objectives:

- Produce a narrative brief framing the PRC intelligence threat using historical, strategic, and case-based evidence
 - Identify and test potential outreach and education strategies tailored to academic institutions
 - Deliver implementable recommendations to increase institutional resilience to PRC intelligence targeting
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3. Theoretical Framework

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The study is grounded in the strategic theory of asymmetric competition and unrestricted warfare, specifically as articulated in PRC military and intelligence doctrine. It incorporates counterintelligence theory (denial, deception, penetration) and applies organizational behavior models to explain why awareness campaigns often fail in higher education. The research also draws on public diplomacy frameworks and perception management principles to shape communication strategies that resonate with academic audiences.

4. Methodology

Phase 1 – Framing the Problem (Months 1–2):

- Literature and open-source review on PRC operations targeting U.S. academia
- Case study analysis of notable incidents (e.g., Thousand Talents, Confucius Institutes, IP theft cases)
- Development of a working narrative brief

Phase 2 – Identifying Solutions (Months 3–4):

- Brainstorm and evaluate potential engagement strategies (e.g., briefings, white papers, workshops)
- Consultation with counterintelligence professionals and academic policy experts
- Ranking of proposed solutions based on feasibility and institutional culture compatibility

Phase 3 – Implementing Solutions (Months 5–6):

- Creation of educational and engagement materials (e.g., slide decks, fact sheets, pilot guides)
- Pilot testing at select institutions or with target user groups
- Collection of feedback and post-pilot refinement

Tools Used:

- Zotero (citation management)
 - Canva (visual materials)
 - Google Suite (Docs, Slides, Drive)
 - Signal or ProtonMail (secure communications if necessary)
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5. Project Roles and Workflow

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Team Member	Role	Weekly Commitment	Deliverables
Andrew Rolander (PI)	Strategic lead, oversight	2–4 hrs	Final strategy memo, SRS brief, pilot guide
Lucy Mathews (GSRA)	Project coordinator and research editor	5–7 hrs	Literature reviews, intern coordination, QA
Interns (10)	Research, writing, design	5–7 hrs each	Case studies, visual aids, outreach concepts

6. Timeline

Phase	Tasks	Timeline
Phase 1: Framing	Literature review, case study drafting, narrative design	Months 1–2
Phase 2: Solutions	Engagement strategy ideation, expert consultation, evaluation	Months 3–4
Phase 3: Pilot	Education material development, pilot testing, revisions	Months 5–6

7. Expected Findings and Deliverables

- A strategic narrative brief outlining the PRC threat to academia
- Educational tools tailored for faculty, researchers, and institutional leadership
- Recommendations on how government, think tanks, and CI professionals can better engage academia
- Deliverables include:
 - Outreach brief (PDF + Slides)
 - Case study packet and visual toolkit
 - Article submission to *Sentinel Journal* or partner outlet

8. Preliminary Bibliography

- U.S. DOJ. *China Initiative Case Files*, 2018–2022
- FBI. *Academic Security and the China Threat*, Public Bulletins (2020–2023)
- Hoover Institution. *Chinese Influence & American Interests*, 2018
- NCSC. *Safeguarding Science Toolkit*, 2023
- Elsa Kania. “Technonationalism and China’s Strategic Objectives.” *CSIS*, 2021