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What Is It About Confucius Institutes That Spooks Lawmakers? A Senate Hearing Suggests 3 Factors

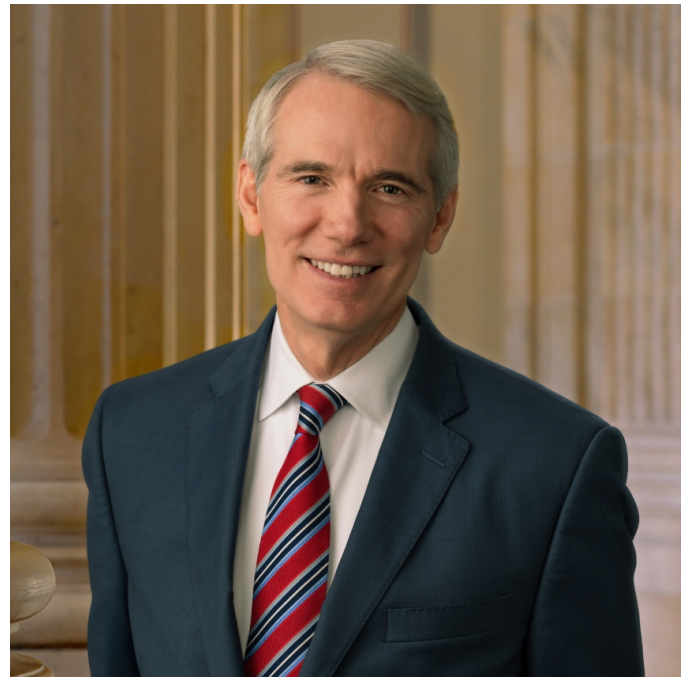
By Lily Jackson | FEBRUARY 28, 2019

WASHINGTON

The future is unclear for more than 100 Confucius Institutes on American campuses after federal lawmakers expressed reservations about the China-funded programs at a hearing on Thursday of the Senate's Subcommittee on Investigations.

Senators grappled with whether the benefits of the centers, such as fostering cultural awareness and language skills, outweighed the downsides of the programs, including concerns about their finances, the confidential contracts under which their teachers and directors work, and the censorship of equivalent U.S. centers in China.

Based on a recent investigation and recommendations that appeared in a report by the subcommittee, part of the Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs, the institutes could be forcibly closed. Here are three reasons for the skepticism that senators expressed during the hearing:



Official Portrait

"The Department of Education has never referred this case to the Department of Justice — not once," Sen. Rob Portman said at the hearing. "The Department of Education has not issued any guidance since October 2004. It's time for new guidance."

The secrecy surrounding the institutes worries lawmakers.

Because the institutes are controlled by the Chinese government, security officials see their proliferation as a possible threat. The Federal Bureau of Investigation is “watching warily,” Christopher A. Wray, its director, was quoted as saying in the report.

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Sen. Mitt Romney, a Republican of Utah who is a new member of the subcommittee, asked whether the institutes served the interests of education or were “a propaganda effort” intended to influence young minds and spy on America.

Romney’s concerns, echoed by others on the panel, arose from the lack of information available to American colleges and universities about how the Confucius Institutes’ directors and teachers are chosen by Hanban, the Chinese-government office that

oversees the institutes. Senators said they saw insufficient transparency about the rules governing the employment of those people, as most of their contracts are private. Contracts that have been reviewed include nondisclosure provisions.

The senators' concerns extend beyond higher education. Confucius Institutes serve kindergarteners through seniors in college. Sen. Rob Portman, a Republican of Ohio who is chairman of the subcommittee, called on the Education Department to exert greater oversight.

"The Department of Education has never referred this case to the Department of Justice — not once," Portman said to Mitchell M. Zais, deputy secretary of education, who appeared at the hearing. "The Department of Education has not issued any guidance since October 2004. It's time for new guidance."

Some Confucius Institutes aren't abiding by the law and are getting away with it.

Only two institutes have been inspected by the State Department, and in both cases, investigators found visa discrepancies. Instructors who were intended to teach in higher education were put in elementary and secondary schools, despite their visa mandates.

The State Department has not collected information on everyone who obtained visas to work at all the Confucius Institutes, so there is no way of knowing how many of them there are.

Recipients of funding from Hanban didn't regularly report to the State Department how much they had received, and neither did the Education Department. Hanban has provided more than \$158 million to more than 100 American colleges for the institutes. Almost 70 percent of colleges that received more than \$250,000 did not report properly.

The State Department has tried to create its own cultural centers in China, but the Chinese government has killed all of them.

Over \$5.1 million in State Department grants has gone to the founding of 29 American Cultural Centers in China since 2010, but the centers have all been derailed. At least seven never opened because of "politics." In four years the State Department recorded 80

instances of Chinese-government interference in the centers' operations, according to the subcommittee's report.

Those that did open faced a number of concerns from American academics about what the centers taught. Some faculty members didn't cover controversial historical events, such as the 1989 uprising in Tiananmen Square. The Cultural Centers, operated by American universities, respected freedom of speech and academic freedom. But the Chinese government controls almost every element of the Confucius Institutes — curriculum, the hiring of instructors, and the structuring of contracts — and Chinese directors or teachers pledge to protect China's national interests while overseas.

Over the past few years, Chinese universities hosting the American programs canceled or did not allow American speakers, lawmakers, and representatives to visit, according to the subcommittee's report. The cultural-center program was closed in December 2018, and as of this year there are no more sites, according to Portman.

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