



October 2023

CHINA

With Nearly All U.S. Confucius Institutes Closed, Some Schools Sought Alternative Language Support

Accessible Version

Highlights of [GAO-24-105981](#), a report to congressional requesters

With Nearly All U.S. Confucius Institutes Closed, Some Schools Sought Alternative Language Support

Why GAO Did This Study

Confucius Institutes, educational partnerships between entities in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and schools in the U.S. and other countries, offer Chinese language instruction, cultural programming, and funding for China-related research. Some officials have raised questions about Confucius Institutes, including their relationship to the PRC government, their sources of funding, and the potential for undue PRC influence or risks to national security.

GAO was asked to review the status of Confucius Institutes at U.S. schools. This report examines (1) factors schools cited for closing their Confucius Institutes; (2) steps schools reported taking to address potential concerns associated with Confucius Institutes or similar programs supported by foreign partnerships; and (3) how, if at all, schools that closed Confucius Institutes responded to any effects of the closure on resources and programming.

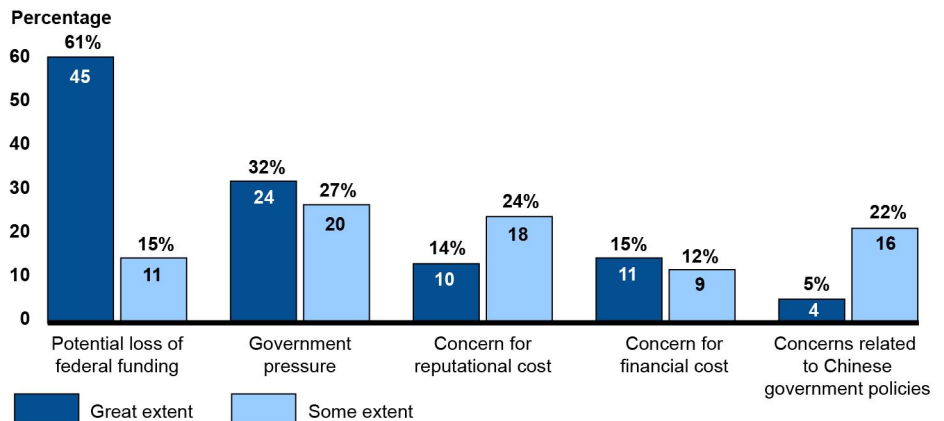
In January 2023, GAO conducted two surveys of almost 100 schools (1) with open Confucius Institutes and (2) that have closed their Confucius Institutes since 2019. GAO's survey covered topics such as the impact of the Confucius Institutes' closure, practices implemented to address risks and concerns, and other foreign partnerships. GAO reviewed guidance documents and written agreements. GAO also interviewed officials at the Departments of Defense, Education, Justice, and State; researchers; representatives from higher education associations; and 12 officials at schools with open or recently closed Confucius Institutes.

View [GAO-24-105981](#). For more information, contact Kimberly Gianopoulos at (202) 512-8612 or gianopoulosk@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The number of Confucius Institutes at U.S. universities and colleges declined since 2019, from about 100 to fewer than five. Schools most commonly cited the potential loss of federal funding and external pressures as contributing to their decision to close their Confucius Institute. More than 60 percent of the 74 respondents to GAO's survey stated that the potential loss of or ineligibility for federal funding, such as Department of Defense funding subject to limitations in the FY 2019 and FY 2021 National Defense Authorization Acts, contributed to "a great extent" to the institution's decision to close the Confucius Institute. Schools also cited pressure from U.S. government, congressional, or state representatives among other factors that contributed to their decision.

Contributing Factors Schools Reported for Decision to Close Confucius Institute



Source: GAO analysis of GAO survey of institutions with closed Confucius Institutes. | GAO-24-105981

Accessible data table for Contributing Factors Schools Reported for Decision to Close Confucius Institute

	Great Extent		Some Extent	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Potential loss of federal funding	45	61	11	15
Government pressure	24	32	20	27
Concern for reputational cost	10	14	18	24
Concern for financial cost	11	15	9	12
Concerns related to Chinese government policies	4	5	16	22

Source: GAO analysis of GAO survey of institutions with closed Confucius Institute. | GAO-24-105981

Most survey respondents from both closed and open Confucius Institutes reported implementing a variety of practices to address potential concerns associated with hosting a Confucius Institute. Eleven respondents reported

that, following the closure of their Confucius Institute, they continued to apply these practices to other foreign partnerships that fund Chinese language or academic programming. The two most commonly cited practices were (1) ensuring Confucius Institute foreign national staff had no decision-making authority on campus (97 percent) and (2) making the U.S. director of the Confucius Institute accountable to senior officials at the school (96 percent).

Some schools that closed Confucius Institutes reported using alternate sources of support to provide Chinese language and cultural programming. Many survey respondents stated that the closure of their Confucius Institute reduced opportunities for Chinese language learning and China-related cultural and academic programming, among others. Schools that closed their Confucius Institutes reported various other sources of support for Chinese language at their institutions, including the schools' academic departments (43 respondents) and U.S. government-sponsored language programs (16). Others reported receiving support, such as scholarships or joint degree programs, from Taiwanese entities (12) and the Chinese partner institution associated with the former Confucius Institute (9).

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Abbreviations

ACE	American Council on Education
CI	Confucius Institute
DOD	Department of Defense
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
IPEDS	Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System
NASEM	National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine
NDAA	National Defense Authorization Act
PRC	People's Republic of China

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October 30, 2023

Congressional Requesters

Confucius Institutes, educational partnerships between Chinese entities and schools worldwide, including in the U.S., offer Chinese language instruction, cultural programming, and funding for China-related research.¹ Confucius Institutes are supported by Chinese entities affiliated with the government of the People's Republic of China's (PRC).² Around 100 U.S. schools once hosted Confucius Institutes on their campuses.³ Nearly all of the U.S. schools that hosted Confucius Institutes have closed them, with more than 70 closures reported taking place between 2019 and 2022.⁴ Fewer than five are in operation as of July 2023.

Since the first Confucius Institute was established in the U.S. in 2004, questions and concerns have been raised about their relationship to the PRC government, sources of funding, and leadership structure, among other things. Some researchers and U.S. government officials have also raised questions and concerns about whether the Institutes are sources of undue PRC influence and present risks to academic freedom, freedom of expression, and national security.⁵ Following the recent closure of

¹In addition, the Institutes sponsor Confucius Classrooms in U.S. primary and secondary schools (K-12). The Confucius Classrooms typically are affiliated with Institutes at nearby schools. In this report, we focus mainly on Confucius Institutes at the college and university level but note where colleges or universities reported engaging with K-12 schools.

²We generally use PRC when referring to the Chinese government or affiliated entities. However, in some instances, when describing survey results, we use the term Chinese to be consistent with our survey language.

³Throughout this report, we refer to U.S. colleges and universities that hosted or currently host Confucius Institutes as "schools."

⁴We last reported on Confucius Institutes in 2019. See, GAO, *China: Agreements Establishing Confucius Institutes at U.S. Universities Are Similar, but Institute Operations Vary*, [GAO-19-278](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 13, 2019).

⁵GAO has issued multiple reports on research security, technology transfer risks, and export controls at universities, including risks specifically related to PRC entities. GAO, *Export Controls: State and Commerce Should Improve Guidance and Outreach to Address University-Specific Compliance Issues*, [GAO-20-394](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 12, 2020). GAO, *Export Controls: Enforcement Agencies Should Better Leverage Information to Target Efforts Involving U.S. Universities*, [GAO-22-105727](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 14, 2022). GAO, *China: Efforts Underway to Address Technology Transfer Risk at U.S. Universities, but ICE Could Improve Related Data*, [GAO-23-106114](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 15, 2022).

many Confucius Institutes, some have raised questions about whether universities may have replaced them with similar PRC partnerships that may present similar concerns.

You asked us to review Confucius Institutes at institutes of higher education in the U.S. This report examines (1) the factors schools cited for closing their Confucius Institutes; (2) steps schools reported taking to address potential concerns associated with Confucius Institutes or similar programs supported by foreign partnerships; and (3) how, if at all, schools that closed Confucius Institutes responded to any effects of the closure on resources and programming.

To address our objectives, we developed two survey instruments – one for schools with Confucius Institutes that were open in 2019 but subsequently closed, and one for schools that were hosting an open Confucius Institute when we distributed our survey.⁶ We sent the survey on January 11, 2023 to 88 schools with a closed Institute and to six schools with an open Institute. We closed the survey on February 22, 2023. We received responses from 74 schools (84 percent) with a closed Confucius Institute and from five schools (83 percent) with an open Confucius Institute. We analyzed our survey results and used our findings to address each objective question. We conducted content analysis of the comments collected to identify key themes. The opinions expressed by survey respondents in the open-ended comments represent their points of view and are not generalizable, but do illustrate the experiences of some respondents with Confucius Institutes.

To understand the operations of Confucius Institutes, we reviewed GAO's prior work on this issue. To examine factors cited in relation to closures of Confucius Institutes, we also reviewed relevant laws and policies. To examine steps taken to address potential concerns raised about Confucius Institutes, we reviewed relevant guidance related to hosting Confucius institutes that have been issued by higher education associations.

We also interviewed officials from three schools with open Confucius Institutes and five schools with closed Confucius Institutes to better understand survey responses. We chose survey respondents for these

⁶Three of the schools that had open Confucius Institutes at the time of the GAO survey and completed a survey instrument for schools with an open Confucius Institute have subsequently closed or are in the process of closing. For the purposes of reporting, we report these survey results with those from open Confucius Institutes.

follow-up interviews based on our review of several survey responses, including those related to respondents' concerns expressed about the Confucius Institutes and their identification of related foreign partnerships. The information obtained from these interviews is not generalizable but provides additional context on schools' experiences hosting Confucius Institutes. In addition, we interviewed officials from the Departments of Defense (DOD), Education, Justice, and State to obtain their perspectives related to the operations and programming of Confucius Institutes at schools. We also interviewed university and government officials knowledgeable about issues surrounding Confucius Institutes to obtain information about various aspects of Institutes' presence on school campuses. For more information on the scope and methodology, see appendix I.

We conducted this performance audit from April 2022 through October 2023 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

Structure, Operations, and Management of Confucius Institutes

Confucius Institutes promote Chinese language and culture primarily in schools outside of China.⁷ They have been established in the U.S. as partnerships between a U.S. school and a Chinese entity, college or university, funded and arranged in part by PRC-affiliated entities. The PRC government created Confucius Institutes, which have operated in over 160 countries, in part to help improve the PRC's international image and reduce what PRC officials viewed as misconceptions about the PRC, according to U.S. government reports.

Until 2020, the Institutes were overseen and funded in part by the Office of Chinese Language Council International, or Hanban, which is affiliated

⁷The Confucius Institutes provide introductory level Mandarin Chinese learning. In this report, we refer to the Mandarin language as "Chinese."

with the PRC's Ministry of Education in Beijing. In 2020, the PRC government renamed Hanban the Center for Language Education and Cooperation.⁸ Schools signed agreements with Hanban to establish Confucius Institutes. Schools may have also signed memorandums of understanding or implementation agreements with their Chinese partner university, which may contain additional information about the structure, management, or activities of the Institute.

The Institutes have usually offered noncredit Chinese language courses to the public for a fee. In some cases, Institute instructors have offered classes to enrolled students for academic credit, or taught credit courses in academic departments. The Institutes have often worked with university departments to co-sponsor Chinese cultural events, academic seminars, and conferences. They have also sponsored programs for U.S. students and scholars to study Chinese language in China, and served as platforms for academic collaboration between U.S. and Chinese universities.

Reported Benefits and Concerns Related to Confucius Institutes

As we have previously reported, school officials have stated that Confucius Institutes' benefits included opportunities for schools to build international connections and obtain resources for China-related programs. School officials we talked to for our 2019 report also stated that Confucius Institutes provided valuable opportunities to increase knowledge of and exposure to China and Chinese culture within the school and in the broader community.

Some members of Congress, researchers, academics, and others have raised questions and concerns about Confucius Institutes, including about their connection with the PRC government, which they say has engaged in activities within the PRC to restrict academic freedom or impose censorship at universities and other institutions. Members of Congress have also raised questions about whether Confucius Institutes are financed or used for propaganda purposes by the PRC government, and some have called for the closure of institutes in open letters to schools in their home states. In addition, some officials have questioned whether

⁸The Center for Language and Education and Cooperation is a non-profit education institute affiliated with the PRC Ministry of Education.

Confucius Institutes facilitated PRC efforts to collect intelligence, including proprietary information and intellectual property.

Officials from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) stated that the agency has not found enough evidence of criminal activity or malign influence associated with Confucius institutes to prioritize them as a national security concern. As part of its briefings to school administrations, the FBI informs U.S. universities about the potential exploitation of Confucius Institutes and the risk this poses to U.S. universities. The FBI explains the long-term risks that could stem from Institutes and PRC government soft power campaigns. According to FBI officials, these risks are separate from malign influence.⁹ The FBI has focused on malign influence risks related to Confucius Institutes' funding, which is part of a broader PRC campaign to build leverage over U.S. universities.

Although the FBI does not view Confucius Institutes as a foreign malign influence issue, there are still concerns the PRC could use them as a soft power tool. According to the FBI, this could potentially result in conflicts of interest for the university, create pressure on university officials to avoid offending PRC partners, or lead to overt PRC requests to censor topics or events. FBI officials added that the FBI stresses transparency as a best practice, which is helpful in mitigating malign influence.

In 2018, the American Council on Education (ACE) issued a list of recommendations to U.S. host institutions in light of heightened concerns about the Institutes.¹⁰ The recommendations included practices to improve transparency of the agreements between the schools and the Confucius Institutes, accountability, and oversight.¹¹ The National

⁹The term 'foreign malign influence' is defined as subversive, undeclared (including covert and clandestine), coercive, or criminal activities by foreign governments, non-state actors, or their proxies to affect another nation's popular or political attitudes, perceptions, or behaviors to advance their interests. Foreign malign influence can include efforts to sow division, undermine democratic processes and institutions, or steer policy and regulatory decisions in favor of a foreign actor's strategic objectives.

¹⁰ACE is an umbrella organization that has around 1,700 individual higher education institutions as members, some of which had Confucius Institutes. Each institution's president is the member of ACE.

¹¹ACE's sister organizations, the Association of American Universities and Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, has also established a best practices document as well as sets of principles covering similar issues that the ACE letter covered.

Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) also reported similar practices in its reports on Confucius Institutes.¹²

Limitations on DOD Funding to Schools with Confucius Institutes

Since 2018, Congress has passed two laws limiting DOD's ability to fund U.S. schools that host Confucius Institutes. The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for FY 2019 included provisions prohibiting DOD from obligating or expending funds for Chinese language instruction provided by a Confucius Institute, and limiting DOD's ability to use funds to support Chinese language programs at schools that host a Confucius Institute.¹³ The NDAA for FY 2021 limited any DOD funding to schools that host a Confucius Institute.¹⁴

Both acts allow for waivers of the limitations if certain requirements are satisfied. Under the NDAA for FY 2019, DOD implemented a waiver request process in November 2018, which required schools to certify compliance with certain conditions outlined in the act if they wanted to host a Confucius Institute while also receiving DOD funds supporting Chinese language programming. As of July 2023, no waivers have been granted to schools, according to DOD officials. In 2023, DOD implemented a separate process for institutions seeking waivers of the limitation in the FY 2021 NDAA. The limitation on DOD funding for

¹²National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2023). *Foreign-Funded Language and Culture Institutes at U.S. Institutions of Higher Education: Practices to Assess and Mitigate Risk*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2023). *Confucius Institutes at U.S. Institutions of Higher Education: Waiver Criteria for the Department of Defense*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

¹³John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019, Pub. L. No. 115-232, § 1091, 132 Stat. 1636, 1997-1998 (2018). The law allows DOD to waive the limitation in section 1091 for specific institutions of higher learning if the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness certifies to the congressional defense committees that certain statutory criteria have been satisfied. According to DOD officials, no waivers have been granted under section 1091, as of May 2023. According to DOD documentation, 13 schools applied for a waiver under section 1091 of the FY 2019 NDAA.

¹⁴William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, Pub. L. No. 116-283, § 1062, 134 Stat. 3388, 3859-3860 (2021). The law allows the Secretary of Defense to waive the funding limitation in section 1062 if the Secretary, after consultation with the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, determines such a waiver is appropriate.

Confucius Institute host schools (without a waiver) under the FY 2021 NDAA went into effect on October 1st, 2023.¹⁵

Other Chinese Language Learning Programs

Outside of Confucius Institutes, there are several federally and internationally funded programs that support U.S. students learning Chinese. The Department of Education and DOD offer various Chinese language learning programs including:

- Education: The Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowships Program provides fellowships to assist undergraduate students and graduate students undergoing training in modern foreign languages and related areas or international studies.
- DOD: The Language Flagship Program is a partnership between the federal government and the higher education community with a goal to build domestic and overseas language programs that produce professionally proficient language speakers.
- DOD: The Language Training Centers Program focuses on providing a contribution to DOD's diverse language education requirements and the broad cultural and regional study imperatives associated with U.S. National Security objectives.¹⁶

In addition, State Department officials told us that several State-sponsored exchange programs have historically offered Chinese-related learning opportunities, including Fulbright exchanges and the Critical Language Scholarship program.¹⁷

U.S. students may also receive support in learning Chinese through various Taiwanese partnerships. In December 2020, the U.S.-Taiwan Education Initiative was launched to expand opportunities for U.S. students to learn Chinese from Taiwanese teachers. Taiwan also has

¹⁵According to DOD, no waivers have been granted under section 1062 of the FY 2021, as of May 2023.

¹⁶One example of a Language Training Centers Program is the Defense Critical Language and Culture Program, according to a DOD official.

¹⁷The Critical Language Scholarship Program, through the Department of State, is an intensive overseas language and cultural immersion group-based program for American students enrolled at U.S. colleges and universities. Students spend eight to ten weeks abroad studying one of 14 critical languages. The program includes intensive language instruction and structured cultural enrichment experiences designed to promote rapid language gains.

several programs, such as the Huayu BEST Program, to facilitate U.S.-Taiwan university-to-university exchanges on Chinese teaching.¹⁸ State Department officials told us that there are 20-30 Memorandums of Understanding between U.S. and Taiwanese universities covering various types of cooperative research programs and exchanges, as of August 2023. In addition, Taiwan is opening Mandarin learning centers throughout the U.S that are intended for the general public, as reported in March 2023.¹⁹

Schools Reported Closing Confucius Institutes Largely in Response to Potential Loss of Federal Funding, Among Other Factors

Schools Cited Potential Loss of Government Funding As Major Factor in Closing Confucius Institutes

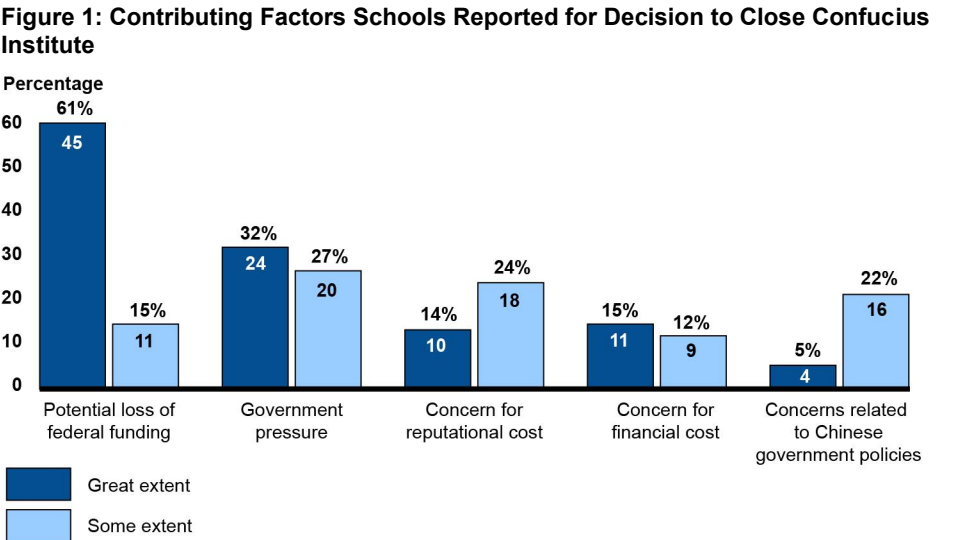
More than 60 percent (45 out of 74) of respondents to our survey stated that the potential loss of or ineligibility for federal funding, such as DOD funding subject to limitations in the FY 2019 and FY 2021 NDAA's, contributed to "a great extent" to the decision to close the Confucius Institute.²⁰ An additional 15 percent (11 of 74) stated that this factor contributed to "some extent" to the decision to close the Institute. See fig.

¹⁸The Taiwan Huayu BEST Program, sponsored by Taiwan's Ministry of Education, is designed to strengthen language education cooperation between universities in the U.S and those in Taiwan, with an emphasis on supporting Chinese language learning. The program provides opportunities for language teacher exchanges, access to Huayu BEST scholarships for students in the U.S., and access to Chinese language proficiency testing, and online learning resources for all partner universities in the U.S.

¹⁹Taiwan's Overseas Community Affairs Council is implementing the "Taiwan Center for Mandarin Learning Establishment Program" to assist schools and associations in the U.S. and Europe set up Taiwan Centers for Mandarin Learning for teaching Mandarin to adults. As of March 2023, 66 of these centers have been set up, including 54 in the U.S., according to its website. The Taiwan Center for Mandarin Learning will offer overseas learners a free and democratic alternative to learning Mandarin and promote its teaching with Taiwanese characteristics, as well as introducing overseas students to Taiwanese culture, according to its website.

²⁰When we report results from the survey throughout the report it is from the survey of schools that closed Confucius Institutes unless we explicitly state that the results are from the survey of schools with open Confucius Institutes.

1 for the factors schools most frequently reported in the survey as influencing their decision to close.



Source: GAO analysis of GAO survey of institutions with closed Confucius Institutes. | GAO-24-105981

Accessible data table for Figure 1: Contributing Factors Schools Reported for Decision to Close Confucius Institute

	Great Extent		Some Extent	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Potential loss of federal funding	45	61	11	15
Government pressure	24	32	20	27
Concern for reputational cost	10	14	18	24
Concern for financial cost	11	15	9	12
Concerns related to Chinese government policies	4	5	16	22

Source: GAO analysis of GAO survey of institutions with closed Confucius Institute. | GAO-24105981

Notes: Data represents 74 survey respondents from schools with closed Confucius Institutes. The numbers inside the bar represent the number of responses for that response category. In the figure, we use the term “Chinese government” instead of “PRC government” to be consistent with our survey language.

Moreover, survey respondents from two of the three schools with open Confucius Institutes with plans to close soon stated that the potential loss or ineligibility for federal funding, such as DOD funding subject to limitations in the FY 2019 and FY 2021 NDAA’s, influenced, to a “great extent”, the decision to close the Institute. For a list of all the factors and

resulting responses cited by schools with closed Institutes, see appendix II.

"The Confucius Institute was operational for nearly ten years and its closure was directly associated with the university's desire to apply for the Department of Defense, Defense Critical Language and Culture Program funding."

Source: GAO survey respondent. | GAO-24-105981

Some officials we spoke with from schools that closed their Confucius Institutes stated their schools wanted to apply for U.S. government-funded language programs, such as the DOD Language Flagship Program or the Defense Critical Language and Culture Program, but having a Confucius Institute would have disqualified them. Some schools kept their Confucius Institutes open after the FY 2019 NDAA placed limitations on DOD's ability to use funds to support Chinese language programs at schools that host a Confucius Institute, but chose to close them after the FY 2021 NDAA limited DOD from providing funding to schools with institutes, absent a waiver. Survey respondents who indicated that their school closed the Confucius Institute in 2021 or later reported concerns that their institution would lose federal grant opportunities, which far exceeded funding from the PRC, if they were not granted a waiver. For example, some schools mentioned that they received about \$125,000 to \$250,000 in funding to support the Confucius Institute, but DOD provided over \$400,000 in funding for language training.

According to DOD documentation, 13 schools applied for a waiver under section 1091 of the FY 2019 NDAA, but, as of July 2023, no waivers had been granted. In addition to those 13, several school officials told us that they chose not to apply for a waiver after hearing that DOD had not granted any. DOD officials also stated that schools will need to apply for a waiver under section 1062 of the FY 2021 NDAA, which went into effect on October 1, 2023. As of May 2023, no school has applied for a waiver under section 1062, according to DOD.

In October 2023, DOD officials stated that they engaged with schools that hosted institutes called "Confucius Institutes" to notify them of the prohibition on funding and the waiver process. DOD officials also stated that they are in the process of identifying cultural institutes that meet the definition of Confucius Institute listed in the NDAA for FY 2021 but are not called "Confucius Institutes." Schools hosting such cultural institutes will

be ineligible for DOD funding unless they are granted a waiver under section 1062 of the NDAA for FY 2021, according to DOD.

Schools Cited Pressure from Government Officials as a Factor in Decisions to Close Confucius Institutes

Over half of the respondents to our survey (44 out of 74) stated that pressure from U.S. government, congressional, or state representatives contributed to “a great extent” or “some extent” in their decision to close their Confucius Institute. A few survey respondents mentioned that their state government had introduced or enacted legislation that prohibited the operation of Confucius Institutes. For example, according to one survey respondent, their state tried to reduce funding to state universities that hosted an Institute.

Out of the three schools with open Confucius Institutes that indicated plans to close the Institute, one respondent cited that pressure from a U.S. government, congressional, or state representative was to “a great extent” a factor in its decision to close, while another respondent indicated that this factor played a role to “some extent.”

Schools Reported Other Factors as Contributing to their Decision to Close Confucius Institutes

Schools that responded to our survey also reported other factors that contributed to their decision to close their Confucius Institute. Fifteen percent (11 out of 74) of survey respondents stated that financial concerns contributed to “a great extent” to their decision to close their Confucius institutes. Some officials from schools we talked to said they viewed their Confucius Institute as having a potential negative effect on the availability of other federal funding, which often far exceeded funding provided by the Institute.

Fourteen percent (10 out of 74) of survey respondents stated that concern for their school’s reputation contributed to “a great extent” to their decision to close the Confucius Institute. In an interview, a school official stated that there was suspicion and scrutiny of schools that hosted the Institutes, which could negatively affect the school’s reputation. For a complete list of all factors cited by survey respondents as contributing to the closure of their Confucius Institute, see appendix II.

Schools Took Steps to Strengthen Oversight of Confucius Institutes, but Generally Did Not Express Security Concerns

Schools Took Steps to Incorporate Safeguards and Strengthen Oversight of Confucius Institutes

Survey respondents from schools that closed Confucius Institutes reported that, before the closure, they implemented a variety of practices to address concerns and potential risks associated with hosting an Institute.²¹ Table 1 lists the nine practices presented in the survey.²²

Table 1: Practices Presented in GAO’s Survey to Address Concerns About or Risks Associated with Hosting a Confucius Institute

Academic departments or other appropriate units maintained full control over all Chinese language courses (both credit and non-credit) offered under your CI.
Safeguards were in place to protect access to sensitive research, including access by exchange visitors.
Written agreements required that CI activities be in full compliance with your campus’s policies on academic freedom.
Exchange visitors who were part of your CI had no decision-making authority on your campus.
The U.S. Director of your CI was accountable to a senior official at your institution.
The governing board for your CI was limited to an advisory capacity.
Written agreements affirmed the primacy of U.S. law and your institution’s written policies over foreign government’s law for all CI activities.
An annual statement of income and expenses with the amount of funding from Hanban or its successor was publicly available (e.g. on your institution’s website).
All written agreements, including Memorandums of Understanding, between your institution and Hanban or its successor were publicly available.

Source: GAO survey questionnaire to schools with closed and open Confucius Institutes. | GAO-24-105981

Note: CI=Confucius Institute

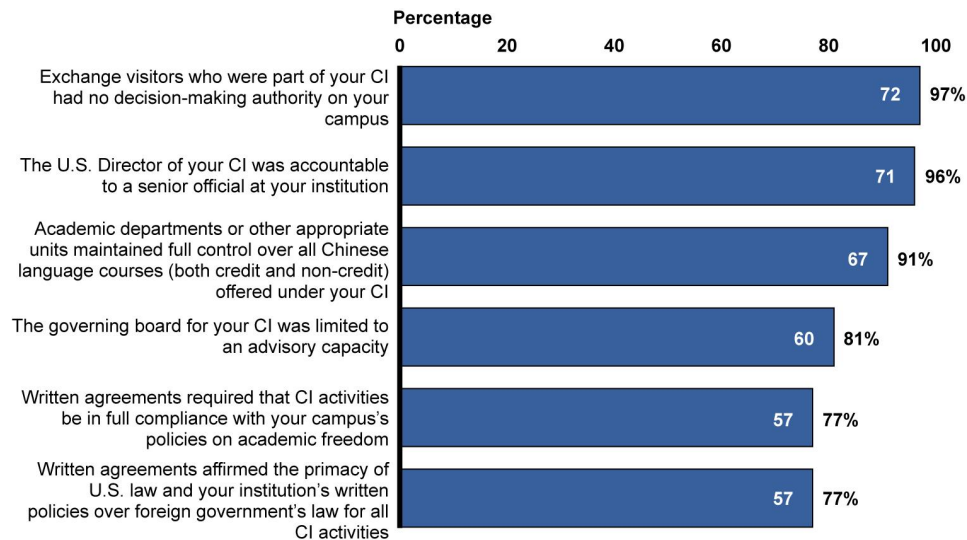
Over 90 percent of survey respondents cited three practices as having been in place at their schools: ensuring Confucius Institute exchange

²¹We presented nine practices in our survey to schools with closed Confucius Institutes and schools with open Confucius Institutes. We developed this list of practices based on discussions with knowledgeable officials and review of best practices documentation, including guidance provided to schools by the American Council on Education.

²²We asked the following question in our survey: “At any time during your Confucius Institute’s operations on your campus, did your institution have any of the following practices in place to address concerns about or risks associated with hosting a Confucius Institute at your institution?”

visitors²³ had no decision-making authority on campus (cited by 72 of 74), the U.S. director of the Institute being accountable to senior officials at the school (71 of 74), and the schools' academic departments or other appropriate units maintaining full control over the Institutes' Chinese language courses (67 of 74). See fig. 2 for additional information on commonly cited practices.

Figure 2: Top Practices in Place Cited by Schools to Address Concerns about or Risks Associated with Hosting a Confucius Institute



Source: GAO analysis of GAO survey of institutions with closed Confucius Institutes. | GAO-24-105981

Accessible data table for Figure 2: Top Practices in Place Cited by Schools to Address Concerns about or Risks Associated with Hosting a Confucius Institute

	Count	Percent
Exchange visitors who were part of your CI had no decision-making authority on your campus	72	97
The U.S. Director of your CI was accountable to a senior official at your institution	71	96
Academic departments or other appropriate units maintained full control over all Chinese language courses (both credit and non-credit) offered under your CI	67	91
The governing board for your CI was limited to an advisory capacity	60	81

²³According to State, the term "exchange visitors" refers to a foreign national who enters the U.S. on J-1 visas. In our survey, we did not define the term or ask if the schools' Confucius Institutes were staffed or supported by Chinese nationals on J-1 visas.

	Count	Percent
Written agreements required that CI activities be in full compliance with your campus's policies on academic freedom	57	77
Written agreements affirmed the primacy of U.S. law and your institution's written policies over foreign government's law for all CI activities	57	77

Source: GAO analysis of GAO survey of institutions with closed Confucius Institute. | GAO-24105981

Notes: Data represents 74 survey responses from schools with closed Confucius Institutes. Survey respondents could pick as many responses as applicable to their school. The numbers inside the bar represent the number of responses for that response category. CI=Confucius Institute

Almost all survey respondents with open Confucius Institutes indicated that they had all or nearly all nine practices in place. Two respondents out of the five selected “not applicable” for the practice “safeguards are in place to protect access to sensitive research, including access by exchange visitors.” When asked about the response, one of the university officials stated that they were unaware of any sensitive research at the university, so the official was unable to describe how Institute visiting scholars would obtain access to sensitive research or related areas.

Schools Reported Continuing Oversight and Control of Foreign Partnerships Following Closure of Confucius Institutes

Some survey respondents indicated that they continue to apply the types of oversight practices they adopted for their Confucius Institute to other foreign partnerships, particularly those that fund Chinese language, cultural, or academic programming. Of the schools surveyed that closed their Confucius Institutes, 11 reported that they currently host Chinese-related programs or activities that receive funding or other support from foreign partnerships. These respondents reported that they implemented a variety of practices to address concerns and potential risks associated with hosting such a foreign partnership.²⁴ All 11 respondents reported that they had the following three practices in place, out of the six practices listed in the survey instrument:

²⁴We presented six practices in our survey instrument to schools with closed Confucius Institutes for this survey question and excluded three of the previously cited practices for other survey questions for brevity sake. We developed this list of practices based on discussions with knowledgeable officials and review of best practice documentation, including guidance provided to schools by the American Council on Education. The survey question asked: “Does your institution have any of the following practices in place to address concerns or risks about hosting Chinese language, cultural, or academic program or activity that are receiving funding or other support from foreign partnerships?”

-
- academic departments or other appropriate units maintained full control over all Chinese language courses (both credit and non-credit) supported by foreign partnerships,
 - written agreements affirmed the primacy of U.S. law and their institution's written policies over foreign government's law for all Chinese language, cultural, or academic programs with support from foreign partnerships, and
 - written agreements required that all Chinese language, cultural, or academic activities supported by foreign partnerships be in full compliance with campus's policies on academic freedom.

For the other three practices listed in the survey instrument for this question, most (8 out of 11) survey respondents reported having the practice "safeguards are in place to protect access to sensitive research, including access by exchange visitors supported by foreign partnerships" and the practice "all written agreements including Memorandums of Understanding between their institution and foreign partnerships supporting Chinese language, cultural, or academic programs are publicly available." Less than half (4 out of 11) of respondents indicated another practice in place: "an annual statement of income and expenses with the amount of funding from foreign partnerships for all Chinese language, cultural, or academic programs are publicly available."

A few university officials mentioned during interviews that the concerns surrounding Institutes at universities had increased the school's oversight of other foreign programs on campus. For example, one university official we spoke with indicated that the development of a faculty governing board to review the budget proposal and Confucius Institute activities was also used for other foreign partnerships.

Most Schools Did Not Express Concerns about Potential Security or Other Risks Related to Confucius Institutes

"The characterization of Confucius Institutes in the press was different from what the universities with Institutes experienced. One of the charges against Institutes is that they were fronts for espionage, but the charge was not accurate as teachers coming from China were vetted and these individuals did not have the technical expertise to be stealing research or technology."

Source: University official GAO interviewed. | GAO-24-105981

Based on survey responses and discussions with university officials, most schools did not indicate having concerns about security or other risks related to the operation of Confucius Institutes. When asked about their concerns related to espionage, intellectual property theft, or other national security threats based on their experience with their Confucius Institute, 80 percent (59 out of 74) of survey respondents stated that they were “not at all concerned” while 5 percent (4 out of 74) stated that they were either “very concerned” or “somewhat concerned.”²⁵ Some university officials we spoke with said that the Chinese nationals who taught at the Institute were not on campus and therefore did not have access to campus research facilities.

When asked if concerns about safeguarding against risk of potential espionage, intellectual theft, or other national security threats were a factor in the institutions’ decision to close its Confucius Institute, more than half of survey respondents (41 out of 74) said “not at all”, while an additional 23 percent (17 out of 74) indicated “to a little extent.”

“[I]n the years of running the Confucius Institute, we have not heard any complaints from students in the program about issues of academic freedom [or] free speech. They focused only on language and culture...”

Source: GAO survey respondent. | GAO-24-105981

Similarly, 69 percent (51 out of 74) of the survey respondents indicated that they were not at all concerned about undue Chinese government influence related to the presence of the Confucius Institute at their school. Additionally, 42 percent of survey respondents (31 out of 74) expressed that concerns related to Chinese government influence and concerns related to Chinese government policies were “not at all” factors in the schools’ decision to close the Confucius Institute. Survey respondents from schools with open Confucius Institutes indicated that they had no concerns about their Confucius Institute for almost all categories listed in the survey. One respondent, whose school was in the process of closing its Institute in 2023, stated the school was slightly concerned about undue Chinese influence.

²⁵We asked schools to respond to: “How concerned did you feel about the presence of the Confucius Institute at your institution for the following reasons: 1) interference with freedom of speech or academic freedom, 2) risk that espionage, intellectual property theft, or other national security threats could potentially occur, and 3) other undue Chinese government influence.”

In responding to open-ended questions, several respondents reported that they had administrative control and oversight of the Confucius Institute and that the Institute presented little or no risk to the school. For example, one respondent stated “A Confucius Institute can have a place on U.S. campuses. It is possible that in some locations an Institute could pose a threat to loss of intellectual property, for example. However, they can also be well managed and implemented to benefit American students, universities and communities. Good management, clear and consistent information, and regulation would not be difficult but would enable students and schools to benefit from the programs.”

“As an entity that works in international education, we are very aware of risks and concerns and have been judicious in safeguarding security and maintaining academic freedom.”

Source: GAO survey respondent. | GAO-24-105981

However, some officials expressed concerns about Confucius Institutes. Out of the 74 survey respondents with closed Institutes, 16 indicated that they had been somewhat or slightly concerned about the Institute’s presence interfering with freedom of speech or academic freedom and four indicated that they had been very or somewhat concerned about the Institute’s presence posing a risk that espionage, intellectual property theft, or other national security threats could occur. In addition, 22 out of 74 survey respondents indicated that they had been somewhat or slightly concerned about undue Chinese influence resulting from their Confucius Institute. Some university officials described security and other concerns related to hosting a Confucius Institute. One respondent noted during an interview that their school expressed concerns about security and undue Chinese influence because of rising international tensions between the U.S. and the PRC, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. That individual also stated that their school was concerned about the presence of the Confucius Institute on campus due to the school’s proximity to U.S. military installations. Several university officials we spoke with mentioned that they understood the overall concerns raised with regards to Confucius Institutes. Some mentioned that they always had concerns about foreign influence, regardless of the country.

Schools Generally Reported Losing Resources Provided by Confucius Institutes and Some Schools Sought Other Support

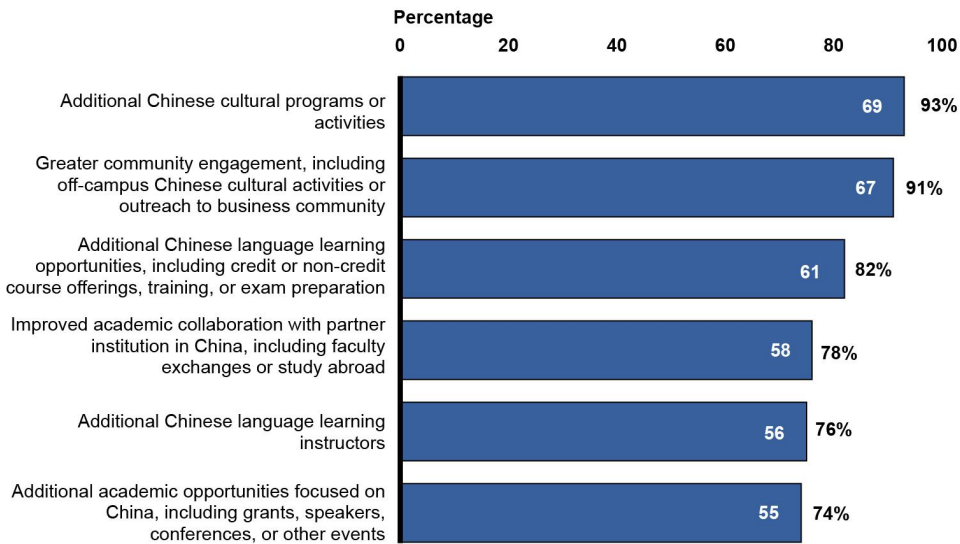
Schools Reported Confucius Institutes Provided Resources for China-Related Cultural, Educational, and Academic Programming

Survey respondents reported that Confucius Institutes provided funding and staffing resources for China-related cultural, educational, and academic programming benefiting both the school and the wider community. In addition, survey respondents reported that the Institutes provided funding that benefited community outreach.

Cultural Programming. Among schools with closed Confucius Institutes, 93 percent of survey respondents (69 of 74) reported that the Institute provided additional cultural programs and activities (see fig. 3).²⁶ All (5 of 5) survey respondents from schools with open Confucius Institutes reported the same benefit.

²⁶The survey asked: "In your view, did the Confucius Institute provide any of the following benefits to your institution?"

Figure 3: Benefits of Confucius Institutes Reported by Surveyed Schools That Closed Confucius Institutes



Source: GAO analysis of GAO survey of institutions with closed Confucius Institutes. | GAO-24-105981

Accessible data table for Figure 3: Benefits of Confucius Institutes Reported by Surveyed Schools That Closed Confucius Institutes

	Count	Percent
Additional Chinese cultural programs or activities	69	93
Greater community engagement, including off-campus Chinese cultural activities or outreach to business community	67	91
Additional Chinese language learning opportunities, including credit or non-credit course offerings, training, or exam preparation	61	82
Improved academic collaboration with partner institution in China, including faculty exchanges or study abroad	58	78
Additional Chinese language learning instructors	56	76
Additional academic opportunities focused on China, including grants, speakers, conferences, or other events	55	74

Source: GAO analysis of GAO survey of institutions with closed Confucius Institute. | GAO-24105981

Notes: Data represents 74 survey responses from schools with closed Confucius Institutes. The numbers inside the bar represent the number of responses for that response category. We used the term “China” instead of “PRC” to be consistent with our survey language.

Almost all survey respondents (72 of 74) from schools with closed Confucius Institutes reported that the Institute provided funding for cultural programs and activities, and all respondents (5 of 5) surveyed from schools with open Confucius Institutes reported using funding for these purposes. Open-ended survey responses highlighted several different kinds of Chinese cultural programming, which included festivals

and events for Chinese arts, Chinese food, and Chinese New Year. Several schools, including both those with closed and open Institutes, associated this programming with wider school efforts to advance diversity and community outreach.

Educational Programming.²⁷ Among schools with closed Confucius Institutes, 82 percent (61 of 74) of survey respondents reported that the Institute provided additional Chinese language learning and 76 percent (56 of 74) reported the benefit of Chinese language instructors. All schools (5 of 5) with open Confucius Institutes reported these same benefits. Based on an open-ended survey question, 21 respondents from schools that closed Confucius Institutes indicated that the Institute provided Chinese educational programs for K-12 schools.²⁸

Academic Programming: Among schools with closed Confucius Institutes, 80 percent (59 of 74) reported using the Institute's funding for China-related academic programming, including grants, speakers, conferences, and similar events. Similarly, 74 percent (55 of 74) reported that the institute provided the benefit of additional academic opportunities. All (5 of 5) survey respondents from open Confucius Institute schools reported that the Institute provided funding and additional benefits from such programming.

In open-ended question responses, survey respondents from both open and closed Confucius Institutes indicated that the Institute also facilitated other kinds of academic programming, including student scholarships, internships, study abroad, and faculty or student academic exchange programs with Chinese partner schools. Some survey respondents mentioned that these partnerships and exchanges existed prior to the Confucius Institute, and several mentioned that these continued to exist after its closure.

Programming Benefited Community Outreach: Among schools with closed Confucius Institutes, 91 percent of survey respondents (67 of 74) reported using Institute funding for community engagement and outreach activities, such as China-related festivals and events. The same number

²⁷Educational programming, which varied by school, may have included either for-credit Chinese language and culture education for enrolled students, non-credit or adult education Chinese language and culture courses for the public, teacher training programs, or K-12 Chinese language education in regional public schools.

²⁸The survey asked: "What impact to Chinese language, cultural, or academic programs, if any, occurred at your institution as a result of the Confucius Institute's closure?"

of respondents reported that the Confucius Institute provided the additional benefit of Chinese cultural activities and outreach to the business community.

The benefits provided by Confucius Institutes varied by school size. Among survey respondents, we found that Institutes were more likely to provide new educational and cultural opportunities that did not exist previously for schools with fewer than 22,000 students, than for schools with more than 22,000 students.²⁹ Our analysis of survey data showed that survey respondents from smaller schools were less likely to have either for-credit or non-credit Chinese language courses, Chinese cultural programming, or both prior to the Confucius Institute beginning operations on campus. For example, of the survey respondents from smaller schools, almost 20 percent cited that their institution did not offer Chinese language courses before the presence of the Confucius Institute, whereas only five percent of larger schools indicated the same.

Many Schools Reported that Confucius Institute Closures Reduced China-Related Cultural and Educational Programming

After Confucius Institute closures, schools reported reductions in China-related cultural, educational, and academic programming.

"I think the most visible loss has been that there is one less way of engaging with our community."

Source: GAO survey respondent. | GAO-24-105981

Reduced China-Related Cultural Programming: Based on analysis of an open-ended response question in our survey, we found that many survey respondents (41 respondents) from schools that closed Confucius Institutes reported that the Institute's closure caused a reduction in China-related cultural programming.³⁰ Some respondents expressed concern about the impact of this reduction or loss of programming on the campus or wider community. For example, one respondent said "the loss has impacted the institution as an education and outreach opportunity to

²⁹We define schools with fewer than 22,000 students as "smaller", and those with more than 22,000 students as "larger." We used data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System to make this determination in order to characterize school size.

³⁰The survey asked: "What impact to Chinese language, cultural, or academic programs, if any, occurred at your institution as a result of the Confucius Institute's closure?"

create a learning environment to the public about China and the Chinese culture.” Another respondent said “the loss of our Confucius Institute was an enormous loss...The opportunity to learn Chinese and be exposed to Chinese culture cannot be overstated for these place-bound students.”

Reduced Educational and Academic Programming. Less than half of the respondents from schools with closed Confucius Institutes reported reduced educational programming as a result of the Confucius Institute’s closure. In response to an open-ended survey question about the impact of the Institute’s closure on Chinese language, cultural, or academic programs, respondents reported either a negative impact on Chinese education in K-12 schools (21 respondents), a reduction in Chinese-language learning resources (30 respondents), or both (15 respondents).³¹ Concerning academic programming, thirteen survey respondents also mentioned that the closure reduced China-related learning experiences like study abroad, internships, or scholarships.

Fourteen schools indicated that the closure of the Institute had little or no impact either on their school or wider community. Some of these reported that the closure had little impact on the school’s programs, but it did have wider impact on the community or regional K-12 education. Respondents from schools with closed Confucius Institutes reported that the closure of the Confucius Institute affected non-credit and K-12 Chinese educational programming as well. Several schools indicated that they discontinued non-credit Chinese education courses after the Institute’s closure, which sometimes impacted the school’s community relations. Several survey respondents, including some we interviewed, indicated that the K-12 Chinese educational programs did not continue after their Confucius Institute closed.

Some Schools Reported Using Alternate Sources of Support for Language and Cultural Programming Formerly Provided by Confucius Institutes

Some schools reported using alternate sources of support to replace the resources and programming formerly provided by the Confucius Institute. Schools that closed their Confucius Institutes reported various other sources of support for Chinese language and culture at their institutions. These included academic departments internal to the school, U.S.

³¹The survey asked: “What impact to Chinese language, cultural, or academic programs, if any, occurred at your institution as a result of the Confucius Institute’s closure?”

government-funded language programs, Taiwanese entities, and the Chinese partner institution associated with the Confucius Institute.

School Internal Sources: Survey respondents from schools that closed Confucius Institutes reported that the university currently offers or provides support for Chinese language courses.³² Specifically, 43 survey respondents (58 percent) indicated that the linguistics, East Asian languages and literature, or other academic department at the institution provide direct funding or support for Chinese language courses (see table 2 for further responses to the survey and other sources of funds or support mentioned). Some additional survey respondents and university officials interviewed reported that they used their own internal resources (including funding, staff, and activities) to support programming previously provided by the Confucius Institute. In open-ended responses, schools reported supporting their China-related programming through internal resources such as faculty taking on some of its programs; utilizing funding given to school by the state; using dedicated resources for diversity, international initiatives, or other existing programs at the school; and relying on Chinese cultural activities promoted through the school’s cultural center on campus.

Table 2: Sources of Funding or Other Support for Chinese Language Courses at Schools Cited in GAO’s Survey

Source	Yes	No	Not Sure	No Response
Linguistics, East Asian Languages and Literature, or other academic departments at your institution	43	27	3	1
U.S. government-sponsored Chinese language programs (e.g., Language Flagship)	16	54	3	1
Partner institution in China associated with the former Confucius Institute	9	62	1	2
Taiwanese entity (e.g., Huayu program)	12	57	3	2
Other Chinese entity ^a	1	47	1	25
Other foreign entity ^a	0	45	3	26
Other ^a	5	35	3	31

Source: GAO survey questionnaire to schools with closed Confucius Institutes. | GAO-24-105981

^aWe asked survey respondents to specify other sources of funding or support for Chinese language courses at their institutions in the open-ended response survey question.

³²The survey question asked: “Do any of the following university, U.S., or foreign entities currently offer, or provide direct funding or other support for, Chinese language courses (credit or non-credit) at your institution? “Other support” could include physical space, IT support, or course buy-outs, among others.”

Notes: Responses are based on 74 respondents who could select more than one source. We use the terms "China" instead of "PRC" and "Chinese entity" instead of "PRC entity" to be consistent with our survey language.

"We are glad that the Confucius Institute has closed but it's important that the U.S. government fill the gap in Mandarin language and Chinese culture courses."

Source: GAO survey respondent. | GAO-24-105981

U.S. Government Sources: Some schools cited U.S. federal government funding as an alternate source of support for learning about Chinese language and culture. Among those surveyed, 16 schools (22 percent) indicated that they receive support from U.S. government-sponsored Chinese language programs like the Department of Defense's Language Flagship Program. Another respondent indicated that Department of Education Title VI funding was an alternate form of support, specifically in the form of Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowships and International and Foreign Language Education grants. However, several survey respondents stated in open-ended responses that there is a lack of government support for the study of foreign languages, and one official we interviewed suggested more government support should be made available to support language opportunities once provided in part by the Confucius Institutes.

Chinese Sources: We asked schools with closed Confucius Institutes if they currently receive funds or other support from any Chinese entity intended to support Chinese language, culture, or academic programs and activities on campus. Nine respondents (12 percent) said that they receive support for Chinese language, culture, or academic programs and activities from the same Chinese partner institution associated with their former Confucius Institute. Eight respondents indicated that these partnerships predated the Institute.

According to survey results, the type of support from Chinese partner institutions varied, including visiting or exchange Chinese scholars, Chinese language staff, interns for language tutoring, and joint or dual degree programs. Three survey respondents reported that their school has various joint partnership degree programs with Chinese partner institutions, for degrees such as animal science, mechanical and civil engineering, and business administration.

One survey question asked whether the institution currently maintains a partnership with the Chinese partner institution associated with the former

Confucius Institute.³³ Although more than half of the survey respondents (43 of 74) from schools with closed Confucius Institutes indicated that they maintain a partnership, in open-ended responses 20 schools indicated that their relationship with their Chinese partner institution was either diminished or dormant, particularly due to the effects of Covid-19.

Taiwanese Sources: Several survey respondents cited receiving Taiwanese sources of support for academic and cultural programming comparable to what the former Confucius Institute provided (table 3 provides an overview of such sources of alternate programming as well as other sources). Twelve survey respondents (16 percent) indicated that a Taiwanese entity provides direct funding or other support for Chinese language courses. In addition, in responding to an open-ended survey question, 12 respondents indicated that a Taiwanese entity provided support for one or more of the following at their school: funding, conferences, research, scholarships, cultural events, Taiwan study abroad, visiting scholars, and/or faculty, staff, or interns.³⁴ One school official indicated that the school partnered with a regional Taipei Economic and Cultural Office to help support activities that were previously offered by the closed Confucius Institute. Among Taiwanese sources, Taiwan authority-funded programs were the most frequently referenced. One school official indicated, however, that Huayu programs provide less funding than the Confucius Institute.

Table 3: Examples of Alternate Sources of Support for Programming Previously Provided by Confucius Institute Reported by Survey Respondents

Source	Entity Providing Support	Types of Support or Program
School	Campus cultural centers	Chinese cultural programs
	International programs	
	Academic departments and faculty	
U.S. Government	Departments of Education and Defense	Foreign Language and Area Studies
		Fellowships
		Language Flagship Program

³³The survey question asked: "Currently, does your institution still maintain a partnership with the Chinese partner institution associated with the Confucius Institute?"

³⁴The survey question asked: "We are interested in learning more about the funding or other support from foreign entities (partner institution in China, Taiwanese entity, or other entities). Specifically, how does each foreign entity fund or otherwise support Chinese language courses at your institution?" The Taiwanese entities mentioned by survey respondents included the Taiwan Ministry of Education, the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office, and the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation.

Source	Entity Providing Support	Types of Support or Program
People's Republic of China	Chinese partner university	Instructional staff Joint degree programs
Taiwan	Taiwan Ministry of Education Taiwanese partner university	Scholarships and exchanges for students Study abroad opportunities

Source: Analysis of GAO survey of institutions with closed Confucius Institutes and information from university officials. | GAO-24-105981

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to the Departments of Defense, Education, Justice, and State for review and comment. DOD, State, and Justice's Federal Bureau of Investigation provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate. The Department of Education informed us that it had no comments.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretaries of Defense, Education, and State; the Attorney General of the United States; and other interested parties. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov/>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-8612 or GianopoulosK@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix III.



Kimberly Gianopoulos
Director, International Affairs and Trade

List of Requesters

The Honorable Clay Higgins
Chairman
Subcommittee on Border Security and Enforcement
Committee on Homeland Security
House of Representatives

The Honorable Jim Banks
House of Representatives

The Honorable Dan Crenshaw
House of Representatives

The Honorable Scott DesJarlais
House of Representatives

The Honorable Neal P. Dunn, M.D.
House of Representatives

The Honorable Matt Gaetz
House of Representatives

The Honorable Mike Gallagher
House of Representatives

The Honorable Trent Kelly
House of Representatives

The Honorable Debbie Lesko
House of Representatives

The Honorable Mike Rogers
House of Representatives

The Honorable Austin Scott
House of Representatives

The Honorable Elise M. Stefanik
House of Representatives

The Honorable Michael R. Turner
House of Representatives

Letter

The Honorable Ann Wagner
House of Representatives

The Honorable Michael Waltz
House of Representatives

The Honorable Joe Wilson
House of Representatives

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

This report examines (1) the factors schools¹ cited for closing their Confucius Institutes; (2) steps schools reported taking to address potential concerns associated with Confucius Institutes or similar programs supported by foreign partnerships; and (3) how, if at all, schools that closed Confucius Institutes responded to any effects of the closure on resources and programming.

To address these objectives, we administered surveys to institutions of higher education, including conducting analysis of responses and follow-up interviews with respondents from selected schools. We also conducted interviews with officials knowledgeable about Confucius Institutes and U.S. government officials, and reviewed various documents and data.

Surveys of Schools

We developed and administered two web-based survey instruments – one for schools with Confucius Institutes that were open in 2019 when we issued our prior report on Confucius Institutes,² but subsequently closed; and one for schools with an open Confucius Institute at the time we sent the survey.³ We sent the survey on January 11, 2023 to 88 schools with a closed Institute and to six schools with an open Institute. We closed the survey on February 22, 2023. We received fully completed survey responses from 74 schools with a closed Confucius Institute (84 percent)

¹We refer to U.S. colleges and universities that hosted or currently host Confucius Institutes as “schools.”

²GAO, *China: Agreements Establishing Confucius Institutes at U.S. Universities Are Similar, but Institute Operations Vary*, [GAO-19-278](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 13, 2019).

³Three of the schools that had open Confucius Institutes at the time of the GAO survey and completed a survey instrument intended for schools with an open Confucius Institute have subsequently closed or are in the process of closing. For the purposes of reporting, we report these survey results with those from open Confucius Institutes.

and from five schools with an open Confucius Institute (83 percent).⁴ We analyzed our survey results and used our findings to address each objective question. Because the schools responding to the surveys do not represent a statistical sample, the results only represent the views and experiences of the responding schools.⁵

Each GAO survey included topics that covered (1) basic information about the Confucius Institute at the school; (2) funding or other support for Chinese language, cultural, or academic programs; (3) benefits of the Confucius Institute; and (4) concerns about the Confucius Institute and practices to address risk. The survey sent to schools with closed Confucius Institutes also included a topic on the closure of the Confucius Institute, and the survey sent to schools with open Confucius Institutes also included a topic on the plans for the Confucius Institute. Our surveys incorporated both multiple choice and open-ended questions.

To identify the survey populations, we identified institutions that had a Confucius Institute open at their school between 2019 and 2022, based on information from our prior report and other reports that tracked the status of Confucius Institutes. Because many Confucius Institutes closed between 2019 and February 2023, we identified two sets of survey populations: schools with an open Confucius Institute, and schools that had closed a Confucius Institutes, as of November 2022. We reached out to the schools via e-mail to inform points of contact about the GAO surveys and to identify a single point of contact to receive the surveys at each school.⁶

⁴We excluded from our final response rate any surveys that had been started but not completed by the time we closed the survey on February 22, 2023. This included surveys from schools with closed Confucius Institutes where respondents had started the survey but then indicated to us that the school was declining to submit the survey, as well as those respondents that opened the survey link but answered only a few or no questions. Two schools submitted duplicate surveys and we removed the first submission for each the two schools from the final submissions.

⁵We gathered and compared characteristics and institutional data, such as student population and public or private status, of responding schools to identify any trends in survey completion or non-completion rates. Analysis of this data indicated that survey respondents were slightly more likely to be from urban, public, doctoral or research universities with a larger student body than those schools that did not respond to our survey.

⁶During the process of communicating with points of contact at schools, a few officials indicated that they did not wish to participate in GAO's survey.

To inform the development of our survey instruments, we spoke with officials at several schools whom we had interviewed during GAO's prior review of Confucius Institutes⁷ to discuss their experiences and perspectives hosting a Confucius Institute. We also spoke with other officials who have studied Confucius Institutes or U.S.-China relations to help inform the development of our surveys. We also asked U.S. government and other officials knowledgeable about Confucius Institutes to recommend experts who could provide additional information about Confucius Institutes. Because this was not a sample survey, it has no sampling error. However, the practical difficulties of conducting any survey may introduce errors, commonly referred to as nonsampling errors. To minimize any nonsampling error and to ensure the quality, clarity, and reliability of the survey, we conducted pretests of both survey instruments with officials at two schools with an open Confucius Institute and three schools with closed Confucius Institutes. In addition, an internal survey methodologist reviewed the survey instrument. We revised the survey based on feedback from those pretests and the reviewer.

To reduce nonresponse, we sent multiple emails encouraging school officials to complete the surveys, and we made telephone calls to non-respondents to encourage participation and troubleshoot any logistical issues in accessing the surveys. We also had respondents complete surveys online to eliminate errors associated with manual data entry. Based on our application of these practices and follow-up procedures, we determined that the survey data were of sufficient quality to obtain schools' views on Confucius Institutes.⁸

Content Analysis. We conducted content analysis of the comments collected via open-ended survey questions for the open Confucius Institute and closed Confucius Institute surveys to identify key themes. We conducted a two-analyst review of the comments in which one analyst assigned a code that best summarized the comments from respondents and a second analyst reviewed and verified the accuracy of the initial coding. The two analysts then consulted on areas of disagreement to reach consensus. Disagreement was resolved through discussion, or by a third reviewer who provided additional input to aid decision-making. The

⁷GAO, *China: Agreements Establishing Confucius Institutes at U.S. Universities Are Similar, but Institute Operations Vary*, [GAO-19-278](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 13, 2019).

⁸Analysis of the characteristics of schools who responded to the survey for closed Confucius Institutes compared to nonresponding schools on a range of variables such as school size and region revealed minor differences between the two groups.

opinions expressed by survey respondents in the open-ended comments represent their points of view and are not generalizable, but do illustrate the experiences of some respondents with Confucius Institutes. These include respondents' experience with their Institute's closure, as well as how, if at all, the Institute benefited the school or how the loss of any benefits has impacted the school.

Follow-up interviews. To obtain some clarification and more in-depth information on survey responses, we held interviews with respondents from three schools who filled out the survey for open Confucius Institutes and from five schools who filled out the survey for closed Confucius Institutes.⁹ We chose survey respondents for these follow-up interviews based on a variety of responses in the survey including those related to concerns expressed about the Confucius Institutes and foreign partnerships identified.

Interviews

To learn about the role, if any, U.S. agencies have with oversight of Confucius Institutes and any potential concerns expressed about the Institutions' presence at schools, we interviewed officials at the Departments of Defense (DoD), Education, Justice, and State. We asked DOD officials about funding limitations in the National Defense Authorization Acts (NDAA) for FY 2019¹⁰ and for FY 2021¹¹ and the associated waiver processes for schools.

We also interviewed an official with the American Council on Education (ACE), an umbrella organization that has approximately 1,700 individual higher education institutions as members, to obtain information on their

⁹We also sent written survey follow-up questions to one school with a closed Confucius Institute in lieu of a meeting.

¹⁰John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019, Pub. L. No. 115-232, § 1091, 132 Stat. 1636, 1997-1998 (2018). The law allows DOD to waive the limitation in section 1091 for specific institutions of higher learning if the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness certifies to the congressional defense committees that certain statutory criteria has been satisfied. According to DOD, no waivers have been granted under section 1091, as of May 2023.

¹¹William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, Pub. L. No. 116-283, § 1062, 134 Stat. 3388, 3859-3860 (2021). The law allows the Secretary of Defense to waive the funding limitation in section 1062 if the Secretary, after consultation with the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM), determines such a waiver is appropriate. According to DOD, no waivers have been granted under section 1062, as of May 2023.

recommended practices for schools with Confucius Institutes.¹² We spoke with officials at the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine to learn about the studies pertaining to Confucius Institutes that the institution conducted that relate to provisions in the FY 2021 NDAA.

Document and Data Reviews

To understand the operations of Confucius Institutes, we reviewed GAO's prior work on this issue and reviewed agreements between institutes of higher education and Hanban or its successor, which funded and oversaw Confucius Institutes.¹³ To examine factors cited in relation to closures of Confucius Institutes, we also reviewed relevant laws and policies. To examine steps taken to address potential concerns raised about Confucius Institutes, we reviewed relevant guidance issued by ACE.

We collected and reviewed institutional data on the schools formerly and currently hosting a Confucius Institute using the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), provided by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics "College Navigator" website.¹⁴ The data collected for each institution from IPEDS included the institution's geographical location, student population (number of students enrolled), type (e.g., four-year, public), campus setting (city, rural, etc.), and Carnegie classification.¹⁵ These data were linked to the survey data so we could compare the attributes of schools that indicated in their

¹²In 2018, the American Council on Education issued a list of recommendations to U.S. host institutions in light of heightened concerns about the Institutes. The recommendations included practices to improve transparency of the agreements between the schools and the Confucius Institutes, accountability, and oversight.

¹³Until 2020, the Confucius Institutes were overseen and funded in part by the Office of Chinese Language Council International, or Hanban, which is affiliated with the PRC's Ministry of Education in Beijing. Hanban helped arrange Confucius Institute partnerships between Chinese schools and schools abroad. In 2020, the PRC government renamed Hanban the Center for Language Education and Cooperation, which is a non-profit education institute affiliated with the PRC Ministry of Education.

¹⁴The College Navigator is a public, web-based search tool provided by the U.S. Department of Education for accessing the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. According to Education's website, IPEDS is a system of interrelated surveys designed to collect institution-level data on U.S. colleges and universities. The Department of Education conducts these surveys annually through its National Center for Education Statistics.

survey responses that they offered Chinese language programming to schools that indicated they did not.

We conducted this performance audit from April 2022 to October 2023 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Appendix II: Selected GAO Survey Questions and Responses by Institutions of Higher Education

This appendix provides questions from GAO’s survey and the responses, from participating officials at institutions of higher education that hosted or currently still host a Confucius Institute.

List of Factors Cited in GAO’s Survey That Played a Role in Institution’s Decision to Close the Confucius Institute

We asked survey respondents to consider a set of factors and to what extent, if any, those factors played in their decision to close their Confucius Institute. Their responses are provided below.

Table 4: Factors Cited in GAO’s Survey as Playing a Role in the Institution’s Decision to Close the Confucius Institute and the Number of Responses Per Factor

Factors	Great Extent	Some Extent	Little Extent	Not At All
Potential loss of, or ineligibility for, federal funding (e.g., due to funding restrictions in National Defense Authorization Acts of 2019 or 2021)	45	11	9	9
Concerns about safeguarding against risk of potential espionage, intellectual property theft, or other national security threats*	4	11	17	41
Concerns related to restrictions on academic freedom or freedom of speech*	3	10	11	49
Other concerns for undue Chinese government influence**	2	6	20	44
Concerns related to Chinese government policies (e.g., regarding human rights)**	4	16	17	35
Lack of student interest*	4	5	8	56
Concern over pedagogical approach*	1	2	8	61

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Factors	Great Extent	Some Extent	Little Extent	Not At All
Burdensome administrative oversight from Hanban or its successor**	0	3	20	49
Pressure from U.S. government, congressional or state representatives	24	20	10	20
Pressure from private citizens (e.g., on social media)**	0	6	17	49
Pressure from faculty or other campus stakeholders*	1	5	19	48
Identified similar programs supported by Chinese colleges or universities*	1	0	8	64
Identified similar programs supported by Taiwan or Taiwanese entities*	0	0	6	67
Identified or was already operating similar programs supported by the U.S. government (e.g. Chinese Language Flagship)**	5	1	5	61
Concern for financial costs to your institution*	11	9	12	41
Concern for reputational costs to your institution	10	18	22	24

Source: GAO survey questionnaire to schools with closed Confucius Institutes. | GAO-24-105981

Notes: * indicates 73 responses (one non-response); ** indicates 72 responses (two non-responses). Otherwise, responses are based on 74 responses (0 non-responses). We use the term “Chinese government” instead of “PRC government” to be consistent with our survey language. We asked survey respondents the following question: “To what extent, if at all, did the following factors play a role in your institution’s decision to close the Confucius Institute?”

GAO Survey Questions About Potential Concerns Related to Presence of Confucius Institutes

We asked survey respondents to consider potential concerns about their Confucius Institute and asked to what extent they shared these concerns. Their responses are provided below.

Table 5: Concerns Cited in GAO’s Survey About the Presence of the Confucius Institute at Their Institution and the Number of Responses

Factors of Concern	Very Concerned	Somewhat Concerned	Slightly Concerned	Not At All Concerned
Interference with freedom of speech or academic freedom*	0	1	15	57
Risk that espionage, intellectual property theft, or other national security threats could potentially occur*	1	3	10	59
Other undue Chinese government influence*	0	3	19	51

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Source: GAO survey questionnaire to schools with closed Confucius Institutes. | GAO-24-105981

Notes: * indicates 73 responses (one non-response). Otherwise, responses are based on 74 responses (0 non-responses). We used the term "Chinese government" instead of "PRC government" to be consistent with our survey language. We asked survey respondents the following question: "Based on your experience with the Confucius Institute, how concerned did you feel about the presence of the Institute for any of the following reasons?"

Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Kimberly Gianopoulos at (202) 512-8612 or gianopoulosk@gao.gov.

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Joseph Carney (Assistant Director), Larissa Barrett, Sean Connolly, Pamela Davidson, Nathan Helman, Chris Keblitis, Lydie Loth, Andrea Riba Miller (Analyst in Charge), Nicole Willems, and John Yee made key contributions to this report.

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