



**The Brookings Institution and Center for Strategic and International Studies  
Vying for Talent Podcast**

**“Can US higher education maintain its global competitiveness?”  
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*Guest:*

AMY E. GADSDEN  
Associate Vice Provost for Global Initiatives  
Executive Director of Penn China Initiatives  
Penn Global, The University of Pennsylvania

*Hosts:*

JUDE BLANCHETTE  
Freeman Chair in China Studies  
Center for Strategic and International Studies

RYAN HASS  
Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy, Center for East Asia Policy Studies,  
John L. Thornton China Center  
The Michael H. Armacost Chair  
Chen-Fu and Cecilia Yen Koo Chair in Taiwan Studies  
The Brookings Institution

*Episode Summary:*

How can U.S. higher education maintain its edge in attracting global talent? In the latest episode of “Vying for Talent,” Amy E. Gadsden, the University of Pennsylvania’s associate vice provost for global initiatives, addresses the importance of international talent flows for American competitiveness. In conversation with co-hosts Jude Blanchette and Ryan Hass, Dr. Gadsden emphasizes the importance of people-to-people exchange as the “oxygen” that fuels U.S.-China relations.

**BLANCHETTE:** America's higher education system is the envy of the world, dominating global rankings. But is the lead sustainable? With rising concerns over crime, racism, and a stalled immigration system, will U.S. universities struggle to attract global talent? Hi, my name is Jude Blanchette, and I'm from the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

**HASS:** And my name is Ryan Hass and I'm from the Brookings Institution. And we are co-hosts of *Vying for Talent*, a podcast exploring the role of human talent in the unfolding competition between the United States and China. Our guest today is Dr. Amy Gadsden. She's the associate vice provost for Global Initiatives and the executive director of Penn China Initiatives at the University of Pennsylvania. Prior to her career in higher education, Dr. Gadsden spent more than a decade working in foreign policy with a focus on China, serving as country director for the International Republican Institute, and as a special advisor for China at the United States Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.

**BLANCHETTE:** In our conversation today, we explore how higher education impacts human capital competitiveness, U.S. national security, and the larger U.S.-China relationship. And with that, let's get to the conversation.

Amy, before we get into the substance of our conversation today, I wanted to ask you first a little bit about your own career trajectory. You've had a very accomplished career as a foreign policy practitioner, analyst, and now at one of America's leading research universities. What started you on this career path, if I could ask?

**GADSDEN:** Jude, Ryan, thank you so much for having me. It's really nice to be here and I'm really excited to talk about this topic over the next hour or so. It's a topic that's really near and dear to my heart for many reasons, and I think it's integral both the U.S. success in the world, U.S. economic success and our national security. But you asked about my origin story, my personal background, so we could start there.

I grew up in New York City. In the spring of 1989, I was a junior in high school. And I'll never forget, in the spring of 1989, my history teacher, Mr. Barr, derailed our study of U.S. history for kind of a weeks-long exploration of what was going on in China in May of 1989, which, of course, were the student protests at Tiananmen.

And I remember he would every day bring in *The New York Times*, because that was our local hometown paper, and he would take us through all of the events that were going on in China in the Square, and Gorbachev's visit, and ultimately the crackdown. And I remember being so taken as a Cold War kid, growing up during the Cold War, by the idea that the students in the Square in 1989 were essentially my age. Right? I mean, I was 16 going on 17. They were maybe a couple of years older. But here they were kind of holding the world's attention on one of the biggest questions.

And I think it's so easy to forget that the fall of the Berlin Wall was after May of 1989. Right. It was November of 1989. When the students took to the square in May of 1989, for those of us who had grown up in the '80s, who believed that the Cold War was a monolith and an immutable state of the world, they were suggesting that things could be different. And so that was my first introduction to China in many respects.

So, it was junior year, and in the spring of senior year, I actually travel to China, which was pretty unusual. So, a year later, in May of 1990, my father, who runs now a fourth generation but was then a third generation metal manufacturing and resale firm, was brokering the sale of a steel mill from western Pennsylvania to Tianjin Number One steel mill rolling factory.

So, he was in the process of selling the steel mill from a town outside of Pittsburgh to Tianjin. And I had time at the end of my senior year to go with him. So, I went. We flew to Beijing and spent a couple of days in Beijing, stayed at the Great Wall Sheraton, which was then one of the only hotels there. And I have pictures of actually being on the square in May of 1990, being on Tiananmen Square in May of 1990. And I didn't know it at the time, because of course I had never been there, but the Square was empty. It was totally, totally empty. And I only realized later, after I had spent a lot of time in China, that, of course, in May of 1990, nobody was allowed to be on the Square except for a handful of tourists who were permitted to come and take their photos.

But I went in May of 1990, I spent ten days watching these negotiations between bankers and shippers and my father, whose company owned this equipment, and the manufacturers, the steel mill rolling company that was going to operate it in China. And I remember thinking this is a really, really interesting place and there's a lot going on here. It really opened my eyes all of the potential and possibility and kind of dynamism that was then sort of inchoate in China.

And then I went back and taught English in the summer of 1993 in Shanghai, again, a city on the verge. Right. So when I went to Shanghai in 1993, the subway was not yet completed. The Pudong–Puxi Bridge, the Huangpu Bridge, was not completed. We were like a group of college students who came out to teach in this English summer language program. And we were treated very graciously, and we got to see all of these things. We went to Pudong and we got to the point of the bridge where it was not yet connected. We sort of walked up to the edge and then walked back. And again, Shanghai at that time as Beijing had felt several years earlier, it just felt like it was on the brink of all of this change and all of this dynamic activity. And I couldn't stop thinking about China. I couldn't stop thinking about understanding China and doing something with my life that involved China.

So, I graduated from college. I'll spare some of the details in between. But I was very, very fortunate to land a job at the International Republican Institute, which had been unknown to me, but I had been connected to it. And IRI was one of the earliest democracy promotion organizations working in China at the time. The Ford Foundation was very active, the Asia Foundation, and IRI—there were only three organizations of that sort actively engaged in promoting legal reform and at that time, local election reform in China.

And I grabbed on the rung at the lowest ladder at IRI as a program assistant and worked my way up. I observed elections all over China in the '90s. I mean, probably 14 or 15 different provinces working with the Ministry of Civil Affairs to promote village election reform. And I was one of the first people, I may have been the first person to write in English about village elections, to publish anything in English about village elections. And so that gave me a recognition or an opportunity to talk about prospects for democratic reform, prospects for legal reform in China.

But my heart was always as a historian. And I've always been really drawn to the parallels between the late 19th and early 20th century in China and the questions and debates today. I

see a tremendous amount of connectivity and insight and all kinds of ways to date Chinese history. But if you think about the period from 1949 to 1979 actually as an interregnum—the period of high communism, the period of high Maoism—really what came before ‘49 and what came after ‘79 is the continuum in terms of China’s modernization, in terms of engagement with the West, in terms of openness, and thinking about Chinese society in new and different ways, and how do you reconcile traditional culture and values with some kind of contemporary globalized China.

And so, I find it very interesting to look at the history of China, the contemporary history of China through the lens of today and vice versa. And so I went back and did a Ph.D. in Chinese history. And I got a call from my old boss from IRI who had gone to the State Department asking if I would come and take a break from my doctoral work and work for State on promoting democracy, human rights, and rule of law in China. So the original China Human Rights and Democracy Fund, the CRDF I think it was called, I helped to establish that between 2001 and 2003.

And in that period and the first decade of the 21st century, the aughts, that was the high watermark for U.S. government investment in human rights and democracy and rule of law promotion in China. And I was able to play a part in in setting that up and kind of establishing that as a as a norm for U.S. policy.

I did finish the Ph.D., which was always a relief. And then I moved to Hong Kong and became the country director for IRI from 2005 to 2008, which was an incredibly interesting parallel to think about the difference to the work I had been doing for IRI in the ‘90s on village elections and rule of law reform from ‘95 to ‘98, and the leaps and bounds in terms of Chinese openness and growth of civil society and liberal thinking to 2005 to 2008, because that was my stint in Hong Kong.

So, that really has come to represent a high water mark for liberal engagement. And, you know, think about the rise of the rights lawyers movement, and the rise of civil society, the rise of journalism, every aspect of thinking about liberal issues or liberal engagement in China was really at its peak in that late aughts period. We didn’t know it at the time, but the decade, the decade and a half since then has all been a clawing back. Right?

So, from the ‘08 Olympics on, obviously, it definitely started under Hu Jintao—I know there’s all this debate, you know, is it Xi Jinping or does it pre-date Xi Jinping? I mean, it definitely pre-dated Xi Jinping. But, Xi Jinping’s ascendancy in 2012 has really solidified a trend or a trajectory of turning away from liberalism, turning away from the rule of law, turning away from global engagement, all these things that we could talk about, turning away from human rights.

And at that time, I transitioned into higher education, initially at the University of Pennsylvania Law School and then in a role in 2014 as associate vice provost for global initiatives at Penn. So I, I get to cover the world in this role at Penn. But obviously China is a huge part of what we do at Penn and in higher education. And so I, I feel very fortunate that I get to stay engaged on these issues at Penn.

**BLANCHETTE:** Thanks, Amy. I feel like a lot we can follow up on just there, it’s a different conversation, a different podcast. But as you were just talking about the sense of progress that was evident in the late ‘90s, I always think about that when these discussions on

was engagement a failure. Because I was in China in 2000 and it was just so palpable how much energy and change was occurring just before everyone's eyes. So, obviously, as you say, it went a different direction. But I think I would have been one of those in the '90s certainly waving the flag for engagement based on what we were seeing. But again, I can see Ryan is giving me the cane to yank me off. So, I'll end that there.

But let me just pick up on, to transition now, you just talked about this role that you're in now at Global Initiatives. You're also the executive director for Penn China Initiatives, and that's how we came to meet. One of the things that Ryan and I have been exploring throughout the podcast is elements of U.S. leadership in science and technology, in education, across a number of domains and how we can maintain that lead.

I wanted to ask, based on this experience you've now had working at Penn on global initiatives and just more broadly global academic engagement, I wanted to ask what this has taught you about what U.S. universities need to do to recruit from a global talent pool? I think probably for most Americans, there's a software program running in our head which tells us that U.S. universities have an inexorable lead, that we're the only game in town for global students. And I wanted to ask if you could give us a bit of a reality check on where that where that stands as of today. Is the picture changing? Is it more nuanced? So, why don't we just start there?

**GADSDEN:** So I think we are the lead. Whatever rankings you look at, whether it's the QS2, whether it's the *U.S. News and World Report*, I mean, U.S. universities are the top research universities in the world. But we can't take that for granted. And the reason we are the lead is because we recruit globally. So, if you think about the history of higher education in the United States, for many years, decades, even centuries, U.S. higher education institutions were very regionally focused.

I think about my own institution here in Philadelphia. Right? We were leading institution in Philadelphia, leading institution in Pennsylvania, leading institution in the mid-Atlantic. But it really wasn't only until even the 1970s or '80s that you saw this pivot to thinking about national prominence. Right? And then shortly on the heels of that, global prominence. Right? So, we have successfully made the transition from being regional institutions to national institutions. And then what you saw sort of coming out of the '90s was this dedication or intentionality about being global institutions.

And we talk a lot about students, but don't forget what we recruit, too, are scholars. We're talent institutions. Right? So, our faculty are just as much a part of our talent acquisition as our students. It's just they're in different stages of productivity and development. And so, when we talk about being talent draws or being destinations for global talent, we need to think both about students, but also about scholars. And one of the challenges we've had is that we do take it for granted. Right? We just assume that the best and the brightest will continue to come here, no matter what messages are signals they get from the U.S. government about the ease with which that can happen, or willingness to have these students.

And I think we should be doing more to embrace these students with open arms. I mean, we shouldn't have debates about should we or shouldn't we have so many international students here. We should be thrilled that we have these international students here. We should be thinking about how to ease their transition into the United States, ensure that they have a

good experience on our campus, and ease their transition into professional opportunities after that.

**BLANCHETTE:** As a follow up, Amy, how are perceptions changing about the U.S. from a demand side? Anecdotally, at least I know Ryan and I, had heard conversations where students are thinking at the margin about other choices. And as we've said, I think a few times, Yale's great, Penn is great, Harvard's great, but so is the University of Toronto, so is Oxford, so is Australia National University. How have events that have occurred in the United States over the past few years—the rise of anti-Asian violence, a perception that the United States is less welcoming for students, issues around crime—how have these, in your opinion, affected Penn's ability to go out into the global talent marketplace and recruit?

**GADSDEN:** So, it's nuanced, right? So, it depends on the field of study, right? You see a lot of these decisions affecting STEM degree pursuers much more acutely than other areas. Right? So, if you are a Chinese student interested in studying engineering, and you want to come to the United States, here are some of the challenges you have to think about. You have to think about the presidential proclamation banning students who—let's talk about for a master's degree or Ph.D., not for undergrad—you have to think about presidential proclamation banning institutions that have been involved in China's civil-military fusion tripping up your visa. Right? So, you don't know if you're going to get a visa. And it can be very hard.

So, you're applying to schools in the United States, you're putting down a deposit, you're getting housing, but you don't know if you're going to get that visa. Okay. So you're making this decision. I mean, these are all personal micro-kitchen table economic issues as much as they are macro ones. Right?

So, let's say you do get your visa and you come here. Your visa as a STEM student is only good for one year. So, if you choose to go back in between your first and second year of a master's program, let's say, you're going to have to reapply for that visa, and maybe you get it and maybe you don't. If you don't get it, then you've invested one year of study, one year of tuition, and you don't have the degree to show for it. And think about if you're a Ph.D. student and you are going for a degree that might take five or six years, you're making a decision as to whether or not you might never be able to go home for that five or six year period because you don't want to jeopardize your visa and risk what you've invested in terms of your course of study up until that point.

So, these are hard decisions we're asking young people to make now. It's amazing that the draw of the United States is still so strong that students will say, you know what, I won't go home for two years. And now with the pandemic, forget it. Like, all the travel restrictions and everything else, I have undergraduates who have not been home since the winter of 2019. I mean, it's a lot to ask of a young person and their family. And so, there are lots of factors that are really weighing on people's minds as they make this decision about whether or not to come to the United States to study.

And remember, too, that the decision to study in the United States for an international student is a multi-year decision. It's September now, we're at the start of the school year. This is not a process by which you start in September, submit your applications in December, and come in August. For an international student, they're starting years in advance to prepare their application. So, they have to have a certain level of English proficient proficiency to even get in the door. Right? So, so they've started that process many, many years prior. They are

thinking about the financial resources that they need to demonstrate to the U.S. government to get the visa, right, you have to be able to show that you have the means to support yourself and pay for your education. They are preparing an application. And if you think about an undergraduate, I mean, you know, those students decide really around 13, 14, 15 years old that they're going to study in the United States for their bachelor's degree.

So, we might not see the effects of all of the last few years still for a number of years. Right? Because the students who were sort of in train to apply and come to the United States, like were still benefiting from decisions that may have been made in 2018, 2019. And it'll be very interesting to see what happens over the next few years as maybe these last few years take their toll on people's decision-making process.

And yes, to your point, we do have a lot of students, and again I don't have data on this, but anecdotally who are choosing to go to the U.K., choosing to go to Canada, choosing to go to Australia, and other top leading institutions because of the uncertainties involved in studying the United States, because they are worried about the visas, because they are worried about the challenges of coming in and out. And it doesn't help, I mean, the anti-Asian sentiment and the perceptions of violence in America just don't help us sell higher education abroad.

Having said that, the United States is still a really attractive destination for international students. And I think one of the things we forget to do is celebrate these students and celebrate this. So, we think about that a lot at Penn, too, right? They face a lot of challenges. There are a lot of issues. But it is also an incredibly rich and wonderful thing that we create these dynamic international communities all across this country, and we get to celebrate that.

**HASS:** Amy, I'm glad that you do because it makes our country richer as a consequence. But I'd love to ask you one forward looking question and one backward looking question. The forward looking question relates to what you were just talking about in the U.S.-China academic exchange context. You've described a lot of discontinuities with the recent past that have taken place in the past couple of years. Some of this is COVID related, but not all of it. Is it possible or how likely would it be that we will return at some point in the future to sort of the pre-COVID status quo of really high-density of flow of students back and forth across the Pacific? Or have we just reached a new normal and this is this is how it's going to be going forward?

**GADSDEN:** That's such a good question, Ryan. And I don't necessarily have the answer. Right? So obviously, the numbers of Chinese students in the United States have dropped dramatically during COVID. I think I saw something that said 50%. Now, that's not borne out equally across all institutions. So, where I am at the University of Pennsylvania, we have not seen that kind of drop either in interest or in enrollment. Right? So, application interest is still very high, enrollment is still very high. So, my guess is it's playing out across higher education very unevenly, as you might expect.

Now, what are the forces that are going to drive a return to normalcy? Right? So, if we can get the travel worked out—and it's amazing to me, I mean, the complexities of normalizing airline travel again, it's a pretty long tail, right? China is not open. We all know that. So, this question of U.S. students going to China is, we're planning in the dark, essentially. I mean, the consulates and the embassy just announced last week that they're going to start accepting visas for international students. Most U.S. student travel to China is short term, it's not a semester. We can talk about the challenges of U.S. semester study. But the reality is that most

students who go to China from the United States are going probably for four weeks or less. And I can't imagine—I don't know the nuances of the Chinese government policy, but I'm sure that they're not thinking of short-term travelers at this point. They're thinking of semester and year. So, that's going to be a very, very small number of people who will probably take advantage of that.

But there are other forces still driving this. So, this summer we saw reports that there's a lot of there's a lot of issues with unemployment of college educated youth in China. So, there's a big push around foreign study abroad in an attempt to act as a release valve around youth unemployment and educated youth unemployment. So, there were reports that students were being encouraged to continue to pursue studies abroad. And that is obviously very promising from an international student mobility factor.

At the same time, we've watched as China's turn inward, the rise in nationalism, the emphasis on Chinese language, Chinese culture, rejection of English, rejection of English influenced things or Western and globally influenced things. At what point does that trip a wire and people say, you know what, we don't value study abroad or foreign and international study as we once did.

When I talk individually to students from China on Penn's campus, they are as committed to their global studies and their international studies as ever. I mean, they really value what they've done. They are proud of what they've done. They feel very engaged and good about studying in the United States and being this bridge back and forth between the United States and China. But, whether that will continue, it can stop. History tells us that.

So, I feel like I have not answered your question. I've just raised all the possible balls that one would throw in the air and say, how do we juggle all of these as we try and figure out what will happen and whether we're a new and a new normal post-COVID or whether there will be this resumption. I have to think that the last few years, both the change in the U.S.'s policy and stance towards China, which obviously pre-dates COVID and is bipartisan, but also COVID will have a residual effect.

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**HASS:** We'll return to the interview with Amy Gadsden in a minute, but now we want to share a new podcast from Brookings that you might like: the Brookings Podcast on Economic Activity. Here's more.

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**HASS:** Now, can I ask you to put your historian's hat on for a moment? Because I think it would be really helpful for us to understand what role people-to-people exchanges have played in the historic development of the U.S.-China relationship. And the reason that I ask this is because I think it'd be really useful for us to know what the United States would stand to lose if we find ourselves in a permanently isolated future with the Chinese.

**GADSDEN:** So I'll put my historians hat on and I might not take it off, so be careful. But yeah, this is something I have spent a lot of time researching and studying and looking at because there was such a period—it began in the 1870s, but really in the early 20th century of openness and exchange between the United States and China, very similar to what has taken place in the post '79 period.

The first Chinese students came to the United States in 1872 under something called the Chinese Education Mission, which was a government sponsored program. There was a lot of resistance, a lot of reluctance in China to send young men here—and of course it's only young men—to study in the United States. And so they ended up taking boys who were from impoverished families but attached to Christian missionaries. Right? So, these were not the elite, the elite would not send their sons to the United States for education. But they found these promising young men who they could take a risk on. Maybe they were second sons, maybe they were, like I said, families that had fallen, their wealth had diminished. And they came as part of a government-sponsored effort—and this is going to sound very familiar—to study STEM. Of course, they didn't call it STEM. They called it coal mining technology, it was ammunitions technology, it was railroad technology. Right? They were all sent here to learn about these advances in technology that were coming out of the West. And, of course, this is part of the, what was called the Ti-Yong dichotomy—maintaining a *zhongxue weiti*, *xixue weiyong* (中学为体, 西学为用)—maintaining Chinese learning for the essence, but understanding that Western learning had practical use.

And so these young men came in 1872. They were very young. They were like 11, 12, 13. And they settled in and around Hartford, Connecticut, because the head of the mission was a man whose name is Yong Wang, who had been a student at Yale in the 1850s. And so he had

ties to the Connecticut area. And they all enrolled in schools with the expectation that they would eventually go to university and to college and become experts in these technological fields.

And the mission lasted nine years. It was supposed to last 25 years. But by 1881, the Chinese government was so concerned about what was happening to these young men—they had become Christians, they had cut off their queues, cut off their braids, they were wearing Western clothes, and participating in Western activities, and they were seen to have their Chinese-ness, their Confucian culture was somehow being eroded by this exposure to the United States. Also, of course, obviously, or maybe not obviously, rising anti-Chinese sentiment was stronger and stronger in the United States. You had the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was passed in 1882, which limited, restricted immigration from China in a very severe and significant way for immigration history and for U.S.-China relations. And I think this was in many respects the Chinese government's response to what they saw as a closing to China. They were going to pull back these students.

But the roots of the Chinese education mission lived on. Those students did in many respects take back a lot of this science and technology learning. And then what you had in the early part of the 20th century after the Boxer Rebellion was the creation of the Boxer Indemnity scholarships. And that was a program, a U.S. government policy by which we took our repayment from the Chinese government for the damages that were incurred by the U.S. government during the Boxer uprising, which the Qing Court had supported, and we turned it into a scholarship fund both to create Tsinghua University, in part, but also to fund students coming to the United States.

And what you see in this consistently—and Teddy Roosevelt was president during the Boxer Indemnity when the fund was created—but through the early part of the 20th century was this real sense among U.S. government elites of being taken in with the idea that by exposing Chinese students to America, by encouraging this exchange in education, we could change China. Right? So, we can go back to the engagement debate, Jude, if you want to go there. But it was this idea that China could be transformed under American guidance or under American patronage, and these students were going to be leaders of that, guides of that, agents of that, if you want to use a more nefarious term.

And, of course, what the Chinese were interested in, again, was technology. Right? So, what you had was this real mismatch of goals whereby China was sending out its best and brightest not to transform itself entirely, but only to transform itself with regard to industry, technology, global connectedness. The U.S.'s goals for the program were render China in America's image, in many respects. And you see that mismatch play out in the post-'79 period. China's goals in going abroad and seeking out all of this education—it's not about individual goals, obviously, but on a macro level—is in fact very different from what the U.S. wants to see as the paramount or preeminent objective of some of these exchanges. And that's why there is this tendency to clash on it.

So, I tell my students, I teach a class on the history of U.S.-China relations. We look at seven topics in the U.S.-China relationship and we trace the historical roots back. And we always start with the people-to-people exchange, in part because it's very accessible for students. They don't realize that they are part of this diplomatic discussion. Right? They don't see themselves as being connected personally in any way to the U.S.-China diplomatic relationship. But when we look at people-to-people exchange historically and in the

contemporary period, they can see that governments have goals around student exchange and people-to-people contact, and that whether they know it or not, they're wrapped up in that.

But what I tell them is people-to-people exchange is like oxygen in the relationship. When you have it you don't even notice it's there; when you don't have it you can't breathe. So, what we're seeing is, as we lose the people-to-people part of our relationship between the United States and China, it will become harder and harder to breathe, the relationship will have a harder time breathing. And that's what happened in '49, right? I mean, all of the connections and linkages shut down and there was no relationship.

And just to get to your point of what's the risk of not having it. So, I think Nixon in his "Asia After Viet Nam" article in *Foreign Affairs* in 1968, which of course was the article where he signaled that he would reopen to China, he talks about the dangers of leaving at that point 850 million people in "angry isolation." Our world without China is a far more dangerous and disquieting world than a world where China is part of the international community. And so, there's a lot of discussion about are we on the brink of China kind of turning inward again? Is this a return to maybe a period where China's more isolationist? I don't think there's anything quite akin to what happened between '49 and '79 on the horizon. But a world where China is isolated from the global discussion I think is a more dangerous world than one where China's a part of it.

**HASS:** I think that's incredibly well said. I do want to ask, the dynamic that you just described—the United States wanting foreign students to go back and change China, China sending foreign students to United States for technology acquisition—how much has changed? How much is the same? And given how entrenched China's political system is, as you just described, why does it matter to expose Chinese students to values like democracy, human rights, and other things that we cherish in the United States?

**GADSDEN:** This is good. This is where we'll get back to the "Was engagement a failure?" question. So, I've spent a lot of time thinking about this question of, you know, was engagement a failure? I've written about it. I obviously had a front seat to it and was actively involved and was certainly a proponent of thinking about liberalization and change in China. And one of the conclusions I've come to is that just because we can't change China doesn't mean that China can't change. The United States may or may not be capable of changing China, but China is certainly capable of changing China. The 20th century is rife with evidence of that, multiple times and in massive transformations. I mean, think about the end of the Empire. Think about the founding of the People's Republic. Think about the post-'79 period and what China became in the '80s, '90s, 2000s. I mean, nobody saw that coming, I would hazard to say with a lot of certainty.

So, China is capable of immense change. And who's going to lead that change and how is it going to happen? Right? So, yes, it's important for students to come here. It doesn't make them advocates necessarily or activists, certainly, but it is how ideas transfer back and forth. And I suspect that goes both ways. But, it's really important, I think, that there are 350,000 Chinese students here each year, part of giving us what they give us. Right? So, we benefit from that. But I think there is a similar kind of exchange or return with regard to just new ways of thinking, new ways of speaking.

I did a bunch of presentation a couple of years ago, it was really interesting. It was a bunch of high school students actually from China who were on Penn's campus. And I had asked a

couple of Chinese students to come and just talk to them about applying to study in the United States and studying the United States and what the experience was like. And the whole exchange was in Chinese, which is always a good test for me. Right? And they started talking about diversity on Chinese campuses. And I wrote down the word “diversity” in Chinese because I’d never heard it before—*duoyangxing*. Like, in my conversations, in my travels, in my discussions in China, diversity was not something that had ever come up. And yet here were these young people, all Chinese talking to each other about diversity, because that’s a really important value and conversation on U.S. campuses. I don’t think that that would necessarily be the same conversation on a Chinese campus.

But here were all these students talking about diversity and then kind of wrapping it and re-wrapping it in their heads around what that means in a Chinese context. And I think that that’s just a small illustration of how ideas shift back and forth when you have these kinds of exchange of students.

**BLANCHETTE:** Yeah. And it seems to me, especially if you think China’s political system is locked in place and becoming ever more closed, the more important it is to have Chinese students with a glimpse of the outside world and a more realistic assessment of the United States, rather than having their entire worldview shaped by patriotic education. And same for us here, right, as we get locked in this competitive position with China, people with on the ground experience who can differentiate between Xi Jinping’s speeches and the lives of average Chinese is going to be critical to weathering this storm.

**GADSDEN:** I really want to underscore how much the converse is true as well. Right? So, we need Chinese people to come here and have these conversations and this kind of exposure. But we do need the same going back. I’m very concerned about the closing of perceptions around China, the rising anti-Chinese sentiment in the United States, separate and apart from Asian-American and the racism, this sense that China is a threat, an enemy.

We are starting something at Penn called the Chinese Education Initiative to contextualize education in and around China. So, there’s are really very few disciplines and fields of study where China is not a major player. And so thinking about whether it’s public health, climate, environment, national security, economic investment, and trade, how do we understand China’s role in all of that? Because I do think it’s really important. It would be very easy, given the national security climate, for people to kind of back off and say, well, we don’t want to study China, we don’t want to do China. China’s too sensitive, China’s too hard. And I think it’s more important now than ever.

**BLANCHETTE:** Amy, I wanted to ask a final question, but by no means the easy question. In our conversations throughout this podcast and in some of the research and events that Ryan and I have been doing, as we’ve talked to companies, players in trying to build out and sustain U.S. lead in technological ecosystems, a common lament or critique, I guess, is that the United States is not doing enough to prepare a 21<sup>st</sup>-century workforce. So, as we talk about building out U.S. capabilities in semiconductors, for example, you hear concerns about the pipeline of talent to sustain an ecosystem of innovation. What role can American higher education play in that and what can be done differently if you buy the premise that we’re not producing enough skilled engineers, for example, to work in the semiconductor industry? What more can higher education be doing?

**GADSDEN:** This is a question that one could address from many angles. If it was just about producing skilled engineers to work in the semiconductor industry, the U.S. higher education system probably isn't necessarily where you'd go to do that. China is doing that, but is China going to outpace us with that? I don't think that's the case. The secret sauce of the U.S. education system is its interdisciplinarity, is its success in developing the liberal arts at such a high level. That that is what draws our students from around the world here. That's what they're seeking. It's that ability to be creative and forward thinking in one's education, not just about like, how many engineers can we generate in a given year.

So, I don't know the answer to how we get more students to be to study engineering, let's say. But, I will say, the growth in STEM majors—I look at Penn, right, that's what I know—it's phenomenal. Those numbers are only growing. So, maybe they're not growing fast enough, but it's humanities majors that are shrinking. So, the question isn't maybe one of volume or maybe it's not only one of volume, but it's about not losing what we do well in that process. Right? Not losing what has made U.S. higher education so successful in that process.

So, yes, we want to produce more STEM students. But I think we should also highly value humanities majors and social science majors and other fields, because really it's students that have exposure to all of those disciplines or core understanding of different disciplines. Right? So, the engineer who speaks Chinese, let's say. Right? The engineer who can work at the intersection of where's China in the science field and how can I be part of that. Or, the law student who is also a student of social policy and practice. Right? Who can understand how education systems should be built to be both lawful and effective. Those are the kinds of things that we do really well. So, it's not simply training engineers. It's taking what is the core of U.S. higher education and building upon that. So, that's kind of from a U.S. side.

In terms of our international students, I think we have an opportunity to do a lot more to welcome these students, as I said. So, there are some things that I hope the Biden administration will tackle. I know when President Biden was on Penn's campus years ago, before he was even running for president, he talked about stapling a green card to every Ph.D. diploma. Right? There should be paths to legal permanent residency for every Ph.D. graduate in the United States.

We have this kind of strange bias in our visa policy in favor of STEM students, which is great. I'm all in favor of STEM students. But we shouldn't penalize non-STEM majors who want to stay and work in the United States after they graduate. So, right now non-STEM majors are allowed to work in the United States for 12 months, and STEM graduates are allowed to stay in the United States for up to 3 years. And really, that should be equalized, because what it does is it forces many international students into STEM majors when they might want to be political science majors or they might want to be a creative writing major, but they want to stay in the United States and work. So, there's some rationalization that should take place there.

And I also think that we should really be looking at our visa programs. It's very, very distressing for students in the summer before they come to the U.S. to go and apply for their visas and not know how long it's going to take. Other countries have figured out a fast-track visa system. And really we should be letting students, especially undergraduates, have the benefit of being able to plan for their arrival in the United States with as minimal complexity or challenge as possible and have a fast-track visa system.

**BLANCHETTE:** Amy, thank you, that was I think a really important conversation, and I appreciate the insights you bring to this, and I think unique to your straddling of both the foreign policy world and your deep knowledge of China, but also now as a practitioner in higher education. So, thank you for your time. Thank you for your insights and appreciate you coming on the podcast.

**GADSDEN:** I was just going to say, Jude and Ryan, thank you so much. It's been such a wonderful conversation and I'm so grateful to Brookings and CSIS for hosting this and for the excellent work that you all do to provide clarity of thought and insight into understanding China. It's really valued by those of us who consume your products on a regular basis.

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**BLANCHETTE:** Ryan, I thought that was a really great conversation, as I expected, given Amy's dual profile as a practitioner of foreign policy with deep, deep experience in China and for the past decade or so, working in the trenches of higher education. So, she really sees quite clearly the challenges that even an elite institution like Penn is dealing with in terms of competing for global talent.

One of the points she made early on in the conversation, and this is something that you and I have heard again and again across our conversations, is that while in a given sector or industry, the United States has a lead, the lead may be eroding, or at a minimum, it can't be taken for granted. She mentioned this idea of a university like the University of Pennsylvania as a talent institution. And it's not just about attracting students, but as she emphasized, it's also and equally about faculty. And while they're looking at the marketplace here in the United States, to be a truly elite global institution they've got to be sourcing talent, the best talent, wherever it is found. So, again, it just re-emphasizes this idea we've heard of U.S. still in the lead, but lead shrinking or at least this isn't something we can sit on our laurels.

**HASS:** Yeah, I think that's absolutely right. You know, as I was listening to her make that point, I was reminded of a comment that Lee Kuan Yew, the former leader of Singapore, made where he said, of course China would like to surpass the United States and become the world's leading power. The problem they have or the challenge they have is that they can only rely upon the talents of their own people, whereas the United States can draw from the talents of the world. And that's a real advantage that the United States has as long as it nurtures and protects it. And I think that Amy made a very compelling case for why we absolutely must do so if we want to preserve the edge that we enjoy, particularly in the higher education system.

But another point, Jude, that she made that really stuck with me was her comment that just because we—"we" being the United States—can't change China, doesn't mean that China can't change. And her use of historical analogies and references to talk about the evolution of events inside China, her comment even about the students in Tiananmen who held the attention of the world and showed the world that things could be different, it was a very personal observation, but I think was a powerful observation. And it's one that I hope that we hold on to even in sort of the dark times right now of China becoming more closed and inward.

**BLANCHETTE:** And as I mentioned in the podcast, it strikes me that especially if you see China on a fixed trajectory of increasing political closing, it actually increases the importance

of finding ways to engage with Chinese citizens, especially young Chinese citizens, because you've got a binary choice. Either their view of the world and of the United States is largely going to be shaped by domestic propaganda, or it's going to be a more nuanced, blurry picture where they're going to get a more realistic assessment of what the outside world looks like, including the United States. It doesn't mean they're going to become Jeffersonian Democrats. But that probably isn't the beachhead we should be striving for, rather just citizens who have a more complex view of the world.

**HASS:** Yeah, exactly. And, you know, I thought Amy made a pretty powerful point, too, where she said, leave it to China to hit quotas for the number of engineers that they pump out of their universities every year. The advantage the United States has is that it's capable of serving as a magnet for people who are interested in and invested in creative, forward thinking, interdisciplinary training that speaks to all elements of their curriculum. That's an important reminder for us that we have unique strengths that we need to preserve and protect. And if we do so, we should have confidence in our system of training the best and brightest to continue to change the world. But it's been a great conversation, Jude.

[music]

**BLANCHETTE:** Yeah, thank you, Ryan. I enjoyed it as well.

**HASS:** Thank you for joining us for today's podcast. Vying for Talent is a co-production of the Brookings Institution and the Center for Strategic and International Studies. And it's brought to you by the Brookings Podcast Network. Learn more at Brookings Dot Edu slash podcasts and send us feedback at Podcasts at Brookings dot Edu.

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