



Charles Lieber (back) is charged with making false statements about a programme in China.

UNIVERSITIES FORGE TIES WITH FBI AMID FOREIGN-INFLUENCE CRACKDOWN

US institutes are responding to allegations of interference in research by foreign governments.

By Nidhi Subbaraman

US universities are forging closer links to FBI agents, encouraging scientists to disclose foreign research funding and tightening restrictions on researchers' travel, according to administrators contacted by *Nature*.

The new measures follow an unprecedented sweep that began more than a year ago, after the US government alleged that certain countries, particularly China, were exploiting the openness of US science for economic gain.

Nature asked research vice-presidents at various public universities – who oversee hundreds of millions of dollars of federally funded science and are key to enforcing relevant policies – what steps their institutes were taking to respond to the government's concerns.

The ten responses received reveal broad cooperation with the FBI. Other measures include making it easier to report suspicious activity, for example by setting up anonymous phone lines. But the responses also reveal frustrations. Vice-presidents complained about having to manage demands from competing agencies, and expressed concerns that hasty measures could antagonize or alienate foreign researchers working in the United States.

The US National Institutes of Health (NIH) first acknowledged that it was scrutinizing foreign collaboration and funding in 2018, amid rising tensions between the United States and China. Researchers who accept grants from the US\$40-billion agency have for decades been required to disclose concurrent funding sources. The NIH reminded universities of the rule, and asked for help stopping “unacceptable breaches of trust and confidentiality”.

The agency says it is now investigating policy breaches by about 180 scientists at 84 institutions. Examples include researchers who apply to the NIH and a foreign funder to support the same project, or peer reviewers who send confidential information from grant applications under review to foreign entities.

Other US government agencies and committees have also responded to the alleged threat. Now it is clear that universities, too, are changing their behaviour.

Administrators at Washington State University in Pullman, Oklahoma State University in Stillwater and the University of North Texas (UNT) in Denton said that they now have regular meetings with local FBI liaisons. They say their goal is to familiarize the secretive agency with university tenets of openness, and the need for foreign collaborations. Such

relationships help to avoid a “surprise knock at the door”, according to Mark McLellan, the UNT's vice-president for research and innovation.

The University of South Alabama in Mobile went further: in September, it hired David Furman, a retired FBI agent specializing in economic espionage and counter-intelligence, as its director of information technology and risk compliance. Furman writes that faculty members now view him “as a resource, as opposed to a ‘threat’ to their research productivity”.

Universities are also changing guidelines for travel. The University of South Alabama has revised guidelines for international visitors, and the UNT is considering imposing restrictions on travel to “certain known foreign entities where technology may be compromised”, according to McLellan.

In response to *Nature*'s questions, Melur Ramasubramanian, vice-president of research at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, pointed to university resources available to researchers. One web page deals with foreign influence; another outlines policies on research integrity. The latter includes a phone number for reporting information anonymously. And the university has an e-mail address for questions about disclosure of foreign ties or potential conflicts, he notes.

Nature also asked the vice-presidents what support they needed to ensure that researchers comply with disclosure rules. Several said that universities are struggling to reconcile differences between reporting requirements from various agencies. And questions remain about what counts as a conflict of interest, and how universities should react in various situations – for example, when receiving anonymous complaints, says Ramasubramanian.

Another issue raised by the government crackdown is whether some foreign researchers are being unfairly targeted. Roger Wakimoto, vice-chancellor for research at the University of California, Los Angeles, addressed this in his reply to *Nature*: his university sent a memo to faculty members emphasizing that it does not tolerate racial profiling.

The responses come as a series of cases ratchet up the pressure on administrators. One example is the arrest in January of Charles Lieber, a chemist at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, who is charged with making false statements to the US government about his alleged participation in a talent programme in China, through which he was to receive hundreds of thousands of dollars of research funding.

His arrest, in particular, has helped to convince scientists and administrators of the importance of reporting requirements, said Mary Sue Coleman, president of the Association of American Universities, at a meeting last month to discuss the threat China poses to the United States.