Friend or Foe: A Brief Examination of the Ethics of Corporate Sponsored Research at Universities

A Response to ‘Ethics and the Funding of Research and Development at Universities’ (R. E. Spier)

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Keywords: corporate sponsorship, industry, university, research, development

ABSTRACT: In his paper entitled “Ethics and the Funding of Research and Development at Universities,” Spier examines some of the potential problems of the relationship between 1) corporate sponsors of research and 2) the universities (and faculty) that receive that funding. Citing “He who pays the piper, calls the tune,” Spier suggests that a better way of funding research would be to “set up a dedicated publicly sponsored research establishment” with the stated goal of achieving particular technical or engineering objectives. (Spier cited the successful Animal Virus Research of the UK as an example). Spier states that researchers at these establishments are “not subjected to the triple requirement to teach, research and administer as are university members, so they do not have to face the same ethical challenges of the academics.” This paper will examine the stated dangers of public/corporate research partnerships and whether the proposed alternative shares equally troubling ethical issues.

INTRODUCTION

This paper starts with the premise that the proper mission of a university should be one of education, research, and public service. If one accepts this premise, one must acknowledge that the faculty and administration of a research university must deal with these ostensibly conflicting missions. Without including the question of the source of funding for the research mission, faculty must make value based decisions on a daily basis on whether to spend their finite time on education, public service, or...
research. Faculty determine this balance on a daily basis. (Some faculty, of course, judge this balance better than others.) It is not a question of how a faculty member avoids conflicts. Conflicts do exist and some of them are unavoidable. It is a question, however, of how faculty deals with these conflicts.

One may believe from Spier’s argument that corporate sponsorship of university research leads inevitably to unethical behavior. One must agree that potential conflicts occur between a corporation sponsoring research and a university (or an individual researcher) performing research sponsored by the corporation. Such conflicts can, however, be addressed in a responsible manner which does not violate the ethical obligations of the university, the researcher, or the corporate sponsor.

COMPARISON OF UNIVERSITIES AND CORPORATIONS

Spier correctly observes that universities are different from corporations. The fundamental values of both entities, however, may not be as different as Spier argues. He observes

“That the mission of a university might be to
- inspire curiosity
- instill criticality
- inculcate capability
in the students so that they may continue to educate themselves throughout their lives without the need for further organized and regimented tuition.”

Spier’s university mission statement differs somewhat from that proposed in this paper, but deserves consideration. Many corporations currently endeavor to commit their employees to life-long learning driven by employee curiosity which develops the capabilities necessary for the corporation to excel. The missions suggested by Spier are quite consistent with many corporate environments. The differences may lie more in why each organization encourages these traits. Spier suggests the mission of a corporation “is to achieve its own survival through the generation of surplus monies which it uses to buy the favor of its shareholders (in case it needs to raise more money to prevent a take-over, acquisition, or merger) and the loyalty of its employees.” This view over-simplifies the mission of a corporation, and confuses the mission of a corporation with the financial results of a corporation.*

By way of an example of the difference between mission and financial results, Texas Instruments (TI) states their corporate mission as follows: “World leadership in Digital Solutions for the Networked Society.” They have long held that their mission must focus on providing products and services that satisfy the needs of customers understanding the obligation to the societies in which TI operates. TI will cease to exist if the products and services that they provide do not add value to the customers and the societies that they serve. Financial performance does indeed relate to ultimate survival. But it is not the mission. Separate from its corporate mission, Texas

* This is an understandable error, given statements by some corporate leaders that they are in the business to “make money”.