

Case Study 1: Academic Freedom and Industry Sponsorship

Industry funding for academic work is neither a new phenomenon nor an isolated practice. Businesses regularly provide financial support for research in areas ranging from medicine and the hard sciences to economics and fine arts. Supporters of such funding note that it contributes to the advancement of science, technology, life-saving medical breakthroughs, and the pursuit of knowledge more generally. They argue that, especially where the support is made transparent, and funders and scholars have a confluence—rather than conflict—of interests, everyone stands to gain.

Critics, however, argue this kind of commercial support can and sometimes does undermine the scholarly independence that is a prerequisite of academic freedom. In an article for the American Association of University Professors, Jennifer Washburn describes the case of David Kern, a Brown University medical researcher who uncovered a lung disease at a plant run by Microfibres, a company that provided financial support to his hospital. Kern faced significant pushback to the presentation of his research, and is no longer in academia. Washburn also describes the work of Martin Keller, a professor of psychiatry at Brown (now retired). One of Keller's studies, which was funded by GlaxoSmithKline, was often cited in support of using Paxil, a GSK drug, to treat depression in adolescents. The reliability of that study and others funded by GSK were later called into question.

Reading:

- Jennifer Washburn, [*Academic Freedom and the Corporate University*](#), American Association of University Professors, Jan.-Feb., 2011
- Michael Rosenblatt & Sachin H. Jain, [*Conflict-of-Interest Rules Are Holding Back Medical Breakthroughs*](#), Harvard Business Review, June 9, 2017

Discussion Questions:

- What obstacles did Kern face in presenting his research? What, if anything, should he or Brown University have done differently? How would you have proceeded in his position?
- What, if anything, should Brown University have done with regard to the criticism of Keller's "Study 329"?
- Washburn argues that academic freedom should be seen as a "collective professional right rooted in the university's core commitment to knowledge for the public good," rather than an "individual right" of faculty members. What is the difference, and do you agree?
- Would collectively-determined limitations on industry funding violate the academic freedom of individual faculty members seeking such funding?
- What is the best argument for the kind of "academic freedom" that Washburn describes? Would you be willing to compromise or even sacrifice that freedom if doing so would result in life-changing technologies or life-saving drugs?
- Rosenblatt and Jain argue that "conflict-of-interest policies should focus on the disclosure, not the exclusion and elimination, of conflicts." Do you agree? Is transparency enough? Conversely, does academic freedom give universities a basis for refusing to answer external inquiries about funding sources? See Colleen Flaherty, [*Academic Freedom or Secrecy?*](#), Inside Higher Ed., March 2015.
- Rosenblatt and Jain point to what they see as a lack of trust for industry scientists, who some have suggested should be excluded from academic conferences and journals. What would justify such a lack of trust, if it does in fact exist?
- As a student, how—if at all—do your professors' industry connections matter for your classroom experience?
- If you think universities should limit or avoid industry sponsorship, are there alternative sources of funding they should pursue?