

Academic freedom and independence of scientists and policy analysts

In early December 2016, President-Elect Trump's transition team sent a 75-item questionnaire to the US Department of Energy (DOE) that stirred up concern among the department's employees and contractors (<http://tinyurl.com/h3a63s4>). Question 13 asked, "Can you provide a list of all Department of Energy employees or contractors who have attended any Interagency Working Group on the Social Cost of Carbon meetings? Can you provide a list of when those meetings were [held] and any materials distributed at those meetings, emails associated with those meetings, or materials created by Department employees or contractors in anticipation of or as a result of those meetings?"

Given the President-Elect's statements on climate change and government regulation, the questionnaire raised the concern that government employees and contractors [including academic researchers] who participated in climate change research and meetings might be pressured to shape their research to be consistent with the incoming administration's political agenda. Within days, the transition team distanced themselves from the questionnaire saying it's distribution was unauthorized.

From our perspective, whether it was authorized or not, the questionnaire raises the broader question about academic freedom and the independence of scientists and policy analysts. Academic freedom and the independence of researchers from those who would seek to influence research results is central to the public credibility of all researchers. From our position as agricultural policy analysts, we want to focus on the work of academics at Land Grant institutions.

Land Grant colleges and universities have a long history of public research. Agricultural research was primarily funded by the federal government in conjunction with state and county governments. Working through experiment stations and the cooperative extension service, Land Grant institutions conducted and distributed the results of their researchers. The primary audience for this information was farmers and farm families of all sizes and shapes in all areas of the country.

The results of this research was freely available to all. The results of agronomists made their way onto farms through public seed varieties while the research of soil scientists provided information that helped farmers reduce soil erosion. Pamphlets were developed to provide information on safe canning techniques and youth had the opportunity to learn practical and leadership skills through participation in 4-H.

Over the last 40 or 50 years, these institutions have experienced a financial squeeze. The cost of research has increased while the stream of revenue from government sources has not kept pace. Needing to find funding sources to keep their Land Grant institutions alive and vibrant, researchers and administrators have sought other sources of funding.

Programs that once were free now charge "user fees," though this source of funding is relatively small. A significant portion of federal funding has been converted to competitive grants. Foundations provide grants for work that is within their area of interest. In many cases, corporations have stepped into the picture providing funding for research that benefits their commercial interests. Researchers have been encouraged to conduct research that will lead to intellectual property that has the potential to provide a revenue stream for their institutions.

These changes in the way that Land Grant institutions raises questions about the nature of the research they conduct. Who is the primary beneficiary of the research and programs of these institutions? What influence does the source of funding have on the direction of the research and the reported results? Are all of the research results publicly available or does a portion accrue to the organization providing the funding?

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