

Research should be valued freedom

By Norman Wessells

The University, and every other major research university as far as I know, has steered clear of limiting the right of faculty members to seek sources of funding for their research and scholarship.

This right to go to any of a variety of potential sources is a fundamental aspect of academic freedom. It means that some

ly, and not reasonably expected to fall into a federal "classified" category, then I believe we are a stronger university for allowing such research.

Once we set the precedent of telling the faculty person that he or she may not seek funding from one particular source or on one particular type of research, then the door is open for political control of the University faculty's research activities.

Some groups would preclude the use of animals in research; others would outlaw development of chemicals allowing self-induced abortion; others would argue that research differences between genders or races is out of bounds; others state that research which "hurts" an industry in the state cannot be allowed. The list goes on to virtually every field of inquiry and teaching.

Such pressures are real, especially in public universities. Witness the recent attempt to require agricultural research at the University of California at Davis to benefit small farmers and not to decrease farm employment; the threats to a University of Missouri faculty person whose research on diet putatively damages the beef and dairy industries of that state.

Another way to view prohibition of certain types of research or sources of funding is that such prohibitions are themselves positions on political or social issues. American universities have been allowed to maintain their independence and academic freedom because they have worked hard not to take positions on political or social issues, whether they be religion, abortion, defense, conservation or others. Quite properly, we may do research to inform those issues, and society benefits as a result.

But isn't the Department of Defense research, and specifically weapons research, an easily delimited category, and simply different from all of the other cases? I think not. To prohibit such research would limit the University faculty and students' work on super-conductivity, super-fluidity, or super-computers — all areas funded by the Department of Defense.

Basic biological research supported by an organization such as the Office of Naval Research

might be weapons-related, depending on the outcome; but it could likely have impact in some area that affects navigation, development of new devices for the blind or our fundamental understanding of how the brain is wired and interprets information.

Whatever the field of sciences, social sciences or humanities, or in professional school disciplines, too, it is virtually impossible to predict the innumerable ways that new knowledge may be used. Sometimes a research result suddenly becomes important decades after the initial publication because findings in other fields change the context of the old discovery, and make it newly relevant.

To attempt to limit the acquisition of knowledge by predicting its possible uses, including value judgments such as "good" and "bad," is virtually impossible and is fraught with dangers for the fundamental freedom upon which universities depend.

If pre-censorship and limitations on research and scholarship are unwise and impractical, are there really limits to the questions a faculty member may ask? I think there are. Some ideas and some proposals can't succeed in winning funding from any source; that is one limit.

But there are other areas that are eschewed simply because of a shared consensus of values and decency among members of a discipline or an academy. There is peer pressure, and it is real. It is a safeguard in the murky area where it is hard to write rules, but in which there is some shared sense of propriety that comes with the educated state.

All this may not be enough for some whose legitimate abhorrence of war leads to demands that research with Department of Defense funds should be outlawed on campuses, but it is in my opinion a safer course for the University and the society we serve.

Freedom to inquire and communicate is our surest ultimate defense and means of improving the conditions of humans and the world we live in.

Norman K. Wessells is provost and vice-president for academic affairs for the University.

Commentary

faculty may win funding from the Department of Defense, the Population Council, the National Wildlife Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Hewlett-Packard Company, the Ford Foundation or innumerable other institutions.

All institutions making grants or contracts to our faculty must agree that the products of the sponsored research will be open and shared freely by publications available to the national and international communities.

The open sharing of scholarly results precludes University faculty and students from accepting funds for work that must remain secret. This means that certain types of Department of Defense and private sector research are not conducted at the University.

The faculty of most research universities, including the University, view that limitation as an acceptable one because of the overriding importance of the free exchange of information in basic and applied areas of research. The only commonly accepted limitation to information exchange is a maximum prescribed "waiting period" that ranges from 30 to 60 or 90 days, in which open publications of results are delayed while papers are filed to establish patent rights.

Faculty have concluded that such a delay is not an abrogation of the fundamental principles of free exchange. The delay has the great benefit of allowing faculty and students in a wide variety of disciplines to obtain support that would not otherwise be available from the private sector.

Some people argue that faculty and students of universities should not be allowed to seek funds for, or conduct research supported by, the Department of Defense, and some propose specific restrictions of research related to weapon development. As long as the results are open, published free-

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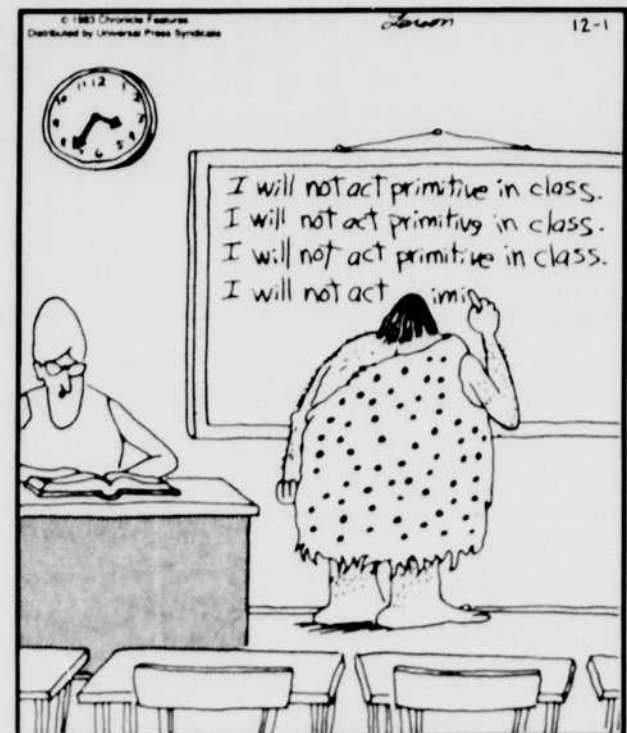


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