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COMMENTARY

Academe need not forswear CIA ties

But professors' first duty must be to truth; agency's demands could corrupt the process

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The Central Intelligence Agency is in the campus news again. In recent weeks, Harvard has seen controversy over CIA sponsorship of a conference on Middle East studies, as well as a demonstration – albeit a small one – against any academic relations with the agency.

How should professors relate to the CIA? Some say, "Not at all." But academics are also citizens of a democracy. And our democracy needs an intelligence agency – indeed, we need the best we can get. In a world where Soviet nuclear weapons can destroy us in 30 minutes, where terrorists can strike without warning and where the spread of nuclear capabilities to other countries threatens our security, it would be foolish to pretend that we can live without an intelligence agency, or to erect rigid barriers between academic expertise and intelligence analysts. If these threats are real, academics neither can nor should ignore them.

Academics play a special role in our society. Academic freedom requires a commitment to truth before power. This does not mean that academics do not have the same frailties that afflict their fellow citizens. But their social role is different and puts them under additional obligations beyond those that follow from their roles as citizens of a democracy. Academics must demonstrate their commitment to truth before power by maintaining open-research processes and peer-review opportunities that allow others to check the veracity of their work.

If CIA money and information were to corrupt such processes, the cost to our society would be enormous. The co-opting of academics is a potential problem. If professors begin hedging their bets, shading their conclusions and not disclosing the bases of their arguments, they will fail in their social obligations. This is not just a problem of CIA money and information. Any powerful sponsor from outside the university, governmental or corporate, could have such corrupting effects. The university needs the protection of clear procedures and a balance among its faculty between

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those who are interested in policy and those whose orientation is more purely "academic." It would be as much a loss to our society to have university faculties totally divorced from the outside world as it would be to have them subservient to it.

The dilemma of finding an appropriate balance in the university's relation to the outside world is best resolved by policies and procedures that make openness the critical touchstone. As long as colleagues, students and other skeptics can check a professor's reasoning for themselves and are aware of the sources of his information, they can discount for potential biases and can judge for themselves if an appropriate balance is maintained. This principle is as true for the CIA as it is for other outside sponsors. The sources of funding should be openly declared, and the results of research should not be censored.

In addition, professors should also consider the practical effects on their colleagues' ability to do research in fields that are particularly sensitive. If CIA sponsorship of one professor's work were to interfere with his colleagues' access to their research resources, the professor would have to consider this pragmatic question in addition to the ethical issue of openness of procedures.

Such a policy of openness – which is in fact the current Harvard guideline – helps the professor balance his responsibilities as a citizen and as an academic. Ironically, however, the CIA has

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established conflicting guidelines. A few years ago, the CIA asked me to consult for them about the proliferation of nuclear weapons to other countries. The money was not tempting, since government consulting fees are trivial compared to other sources of funds. But I had worked on the issue of slowing the spread of nuclear weapons when I was in the State Department, and felt strongly about its importance to our national security. Thus, I was willing to be a consultant.

However, when the CIA sent me its consultant's contract, it included a clause that required that I submit all my writings to the CIA for their concurrence. I replied that such a broad right of censorship was incompatible with my obligations as an academic. I would only submit specific writings that dealt directly with my consulting or in which there might be some danger of disclosing sensitive sources or methods of intelligence. But this was not enough for the CIA. I received a polite letter from a deputy director stating that a broad right of clearance was official administration policy. I refused to consult for them.

The effect of the CIA policy is to exclude some academics from providing their expertise on subjects that concern them as citizens, while making others take positions that may erode the openness of procedures. In principle, there are procedures by which academics may balance the competing moral claims arising from their roles as citizens of a democracy and professors in a university. The irony of the situation is that they are difficult to apply because of CIA policies. The net effect is that the CIA reinforces the claims of its detractors who seek a total divorce between the agency and the academy.

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