

Industry support of academic life science research may be dropping

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While more than half the academic life science researchers responding to a 2007 survey indicated having some relationship with industrial entities, the prevalence of such relationships - particularly direct funding for research studies - appears to be dropping. Results of the survey, appearing in the November/December 2009 issue of *Health Affairs*, also suggest that interest in commercial applications of research appears to be growing, even among investigators without industry funding. The new study is a follow-up to 1985 and 1995 surveys by members of the same team.

"It had been ten years since our last survey, and attitudes about academic-industry relationships have changed, leading many hospitals, universities and other research organizations to institute new conflict-of-interest policies," explains Darren Zinner, PhD, who led the study as a postdoctoral fellow at the Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) Institute for Health Policy. "Additionally, the economics of the pharmaceutical and biotech industries have shifted, and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) budget doubled in that time. All of these factors may have made faculty less dependent on industry funding. Because many of these conflict-of-interest policies are now being re-examined, it was time to repeat the study, establish new data points and analyze any trends that appeared." Zinner is now at the Schneider Institutes for Health Policy in the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University.

In late 2006 and early 2007, the researchers mailed surveys to a

randomly selected group of [life science](#) faculty members at the 50 U.S. universities receiving the most NIH support in 2004. The survey asked a range of questions about respondents' relationships and activities in the preceding three years. Of more than 2,900 eligible faculty members to whom surveys were sent, almost 2,100 replied, for a response rate of 74 percent. Almost 53 percent of respondents reported some sort of industry relationship in the preceding three years - most frequently consulting, paid speaking, research grants and contracts, and scientific advisory board membership.

Overall, 20 percent of research faculty received industry funding in 2006, a significant decrease from the 28 percent of faculty in 1995. For those with industry support, the magnitude of per-investigator funding remained essentially unchanged, indicating a decrease in overall corporate spending in academic life-science research. As in the previous studies, industry relationships were more common among senior faculty members, with full professors being up to twice as likely as junior faculty to be involved with industry.

In addition, [faculty members](#) with industry relationships were more productive, as measured by the number of publications and the impact of the journals in which their studies appeared. "While it's possible that industry funding and connections increased their academic output," Zinner explains, "it's more likely that companies are seeking out highly productive investigators who are opinion leaders in their fields."

Similar to previous studies, industry-funded scientists were more likely to report that their work resulted in trade secrets - information kept secret to protect its potential commercial value - or that publication had been delayed for longer than six months. However, rates of patenting and trade secrecy also more than doubled since 1985 among researchers without corporate sponsorship, suggesting activities previously associated with industry funding are more widespread among all

academic scientists.

"Industry relationships may be declining because of increased regulation by universities as well as a general attitude among the public that working with industry is in some way bad," explains Eric Campbell, PhD, director of Research at the MGH Institute for Health Policy (MGH-IHP), the study's senior author. "But the drop in these relationships doesn't mean that institutions can stop paying attention to them. Finding that half of all university scientists - both clinical and nonclinical researchers - have some form of industry relationships emphasizes the importance of continued and perhaps more intense reporting and scrutiny."

However, Campbell notes, the fact that less than 65 percent of full professors report industry relationships refutes the common assertion that there are no senior academic scientists without industry connections who could serve on advisory panels for the NIH and the Food and Drug Administration. "Those organizations just need to look a little harder for such folks," he says. Campbell is an associate professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School, and Zinner is a senior lecturer at Brandeis University.

Source: Massachusetts General Hospital ([news](#) : [web](#))

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