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The Foreign Policy of U.S. Universities

The accelerating globalization of technology, industrial practice, and economic markets should stimulate universities to reflect on the international dimensions of education and research. However, universities are busy defending current practices against growing criticism rather than devoting attention to formulating a coherent justification for foreign involvement.

The criticism arises from the tension between the long-term view that the university's purpose is to produce knowledge and educate people and the newer short-term view that U.S. research universities, largely supported by taxes, can and should be managed to improve U.S. economic competitiveness. It would be convenient if the criticisms could be rejected, but unfortunately, they have some merit.

A number of federal agencies increasingly use competitiveness to justify their research budgets to Congress. If university research programs have potential commercial value, it is natural for a concern to arise about technology transfer to foreign competitors. Therefore, some research sponsors seek formal or informal restrictions—for example, contract funds may not be used to support foreign graduate students or postdoctoral fellows for specific projects. The same research universities that encourage the budget justifications indignantly resist the restrictions that the public budget justification implies.

However, it is not unreasonable to expect that when a university accepts research that is justified by its value for commercial technology, that university must be prepared to agree to certain (but not all) restrictions that the sponsor proposes to specific contracts. The call for restrictions will continue until public claims about the short-run domestic economic value of university-based research become more realistic.

In addition, U.S. research universities are expanding university-industry programs in order to better learn about the process of innovation. Again, the question of foreign participation arises but should be simply resolved. Because the purpose of these cooperative efforts is clear—to improve the performance of U.S. industry—the appropriate test for such participation is whether the foreign firm contributes to the success of the technical program.

It is more difficult to defend university-industry liaison programs that sell access to and patents on taxpayer-supported research to foreign corporations. The typical congressman does not understand why universities should profit from transferring technology created on government grants to U.S. economic competitors.

However, the large number of foreign graduate students and postdoctoral fellows on U.S. campuses presents the most difficult problem. Although both U.S. universities and industry have become dependent on this source of talent, there is growing criticism about this proportion, both from those who believe that the United States is exploiting the intellectual capital of other nations and from those who believe that the United States is being exploited by nations that send their scientists here to learn about basic technology for use at home.

It would be comfortable to reject these two contradictory criticisms and argue that academic freedom demands the admission to U.S. research universities of the best minds, without regard to national origin or future employment location. But the number of foreign students and postdoctoral fellows in many departments is determined more by the demand created by available research funding than by an academic judgment about the desirable level of foreign student presence.

This issue would likely disappear if the proportion of foreigners fell from about 40 to 20 percent (excluding neighboring Canada and Mexico). Such a reduction could have the welcome effect of encouraging the recruitment of U.S. young people, especially minorities and women, into scientific careers.

It is neither necessary nor likely that the tension between the national and international purposes of the U.S. university will be entirely resolved. The welcome current emphasis on improving the nation's economic competitiveness has been accompanied by an unhealthy shift toward short-term nationalistic orientation. If the accompanying protectionism is to be avoided, universities must make a coherent case for the long-term benefits of international relationships and alter their policies to respond to legitimate concerns about benefits the U.S. public receives from its support of research universities.—**JOHN DEUTCH**, *Institute Professor, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA 02139*



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