GUIDANCE ON FUNDING FROM INDUSTRY

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During an intensive two day conversation held in Detroit May 3-4, 2014, members of the SRPOISE consortium (Heather Douglas, Kevin Elliott, Paul Thompson, Kyle Whyte) and the University of Michigan Risk Science Center (Andrew Maynard, Diana Bowman) discussed the issues involved with taking funding from an industrial or corporate group in order to do scientific work (whether data collection, synthetic analysis, or science communication). The group discussed the possible problems such funding could pose, key values to be protected, and possible solutions to the challenge. While there is no perfect institutional solution to the problems posed by public-private partnerships and the acceptance of private money to do work in the public interest, the group developed a set of overlapping practices that could serve to protect the integrity and credibility of such projects.

The central values to protect were described as integrity and credibility, of both the work being conducted and the institutional home accepting the external funding. Integrity is crucial for any intellectual work, and to protect it from the possible corrupting influences of private funding, academics must be aware of how private funding can generate a range of conflicts of interest (COI) and influences on the direction of attention and research. It is clear from research on COI that there is no perfect institutional solution to the challenge of COI. (Elliott 2008) Disclosure does not solve the problem. Rejecting the funds is extremely difficult in times of fiscal austerity and pressure from within academic institutions to seek external funds, particularly from the private sector. Additionally, taking funds from private partners can damage the credibility of the organization, even if it attempts to act with perfect integrity. (Marks 2013) And any slips in integrity or perception of distortion of the work done can permanently damage the credibility of an organization, a risk amplified when taking private money.

In order to protect the integrity and credibility of an organization receiving private money, the group discussed an overlapping set of efforts.

First, the organization needs to be clearly committed at a personal level to maintaining integrity and credibility. Any additional efforts will be moot if this is not the case. To help think through what this commitment means, the organization should work through potential scenarios and come to an agreement on how they would be addressed with integrity and credibility.

Second, the organization needs to have good policies in place. While policies are not sufficient on their own, they are necessary. It is important that the organization have a clear mission statement and that endeavors undertaken align with their overall goals. It is important that the organization have clear policies to address such issues as: transparency, conflict of interest, integrity, whistleblowers, communication, collaboration, and overall management. Policies should include a commitment to always attempt to diversify funding for any given project, or set of projects, so that COI issues

become less pronounced. In addition, it is important that organizations involved with PPPs have the freedom to publish their work. While such freedom does not prevent COI concerns about distortion (as the promise of future funding is sufficient to put pressure on current projects), it is necessary for baseline integrity. Overall, such policies should be public, vetted, and taken to heart by the organization.

Third, the organization needs to engage others outside both their key funders and their internal staff to ensure integrity and credibility. Good institutional policy is important, but it is not enough. Engagement is needed to counterbalance the potential value-based influences of funding on the framing and selection of project, the evidence considered, the assessments of evidential sufficiency, the range of explanations of phenomena considered, and the assessments of what is important in a topic.

There are multiple possibilities for engagement with a broader range of stakeholders and/or the public. For example:

- ❖ One can engage with citizen panels where a random sample of the public meets for a few days to intensively discuss an issue, informed by a range of experts. Such panels can elucidate a range of value-based considerations.
- ❖ One can develop a stakeholder advisory body, with representatives from NGOs, government, academia, and industry (although not the funder, and industry should remain a distinct minority) that can provide guidance on project selection and framing, and help recruit needed expertise to projects.
- ❖ One can hold open town hall or public comment meetings to gather input on a topic.
- ❖ One can develop online fora where people can provide feedback.

Each of these possibilities is imperfect, and subject to threats of capture by extreme ideological positions. In our discussions, a hybrid approach, with a stakeholder advisory body (which would review the activities and outputs of the organization, advise on where to focus future efforts, and identify new partnerships and opportunities) and having an open meeting where interested members of the public could provide feedback, seemed to be a plausible approach.

Fourth, some oversight for an organization's activities by an independent third party would be helpful.   Such oversight could be in the form of an auditor or an evaluator for the activities of the organization. It could entail a public report on the organization or be responsive to concerns or complaints from the community. The challenge is in setting up and maintaining such an independent organization, which would have its own challenges of maintaining integrity and credibility. Foundation funding might be of assistance here, and elsewhere where more diverse funding sources are needed.

In sum, no one of these approaches would suffice to protect the integrity and credibility of an organization engaged in a public-private partnership. But a combination of the approaches could create the overlapping, interactive, and resilient structures to achieve the desired goal.

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References

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