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Protectionism and the Universities

There are many good reasons for the great current attention to university-industry relations, but there are troublesome reasons as well. One is that universities are now unusually hungry. There is nothing wrong with hunger. But a hungry man may cut corners in his rush to nourishment, and he may be taken advantage of in negotiations. Fear of this is leading to the threat of protectionism, as exemplified by recent attempts to classify or otherwise control access to university research, including that joint with industry.

In designing university-industry connections, protecting interests by high-level negotiations is wrong. The adversary process, and the proliferation of lawyers to manipulate it, was never intended to apply to joint programs, where the output is also joint, where it is by no means a zero-sum game, and where the accomplishments for all participants are far greater if speed and simplicity of negotiations take the place of exquisitely detailed legal contracts. Protectionism is dangerous and habit-forming. Circumstances exist where it is appropriate, but only for a short time. One of the few essentials of agreements is that any secrecy or interference with open publication or student interaction should be strictly temporary.

The dominant problem of supporting enough basic research in universities will remain. This must continue to be a federal responsibility; no company or industry can harvest the results soon enough to justify any investment larger than keeping a window on basic research and a conduit for the movement of bright young people into the company. Hard work in the universities will lead to important cooperative research agreements with industry, but unremitting effort will be required to maintain or enlarge the basic research on which all else rests.

But there is far more at stake than support for universities. University-industry interaction should not be looked upon as support at all, but as an absolutely necessary part of the survival both of American institutions and of the American economy. As the economy stumbles, protectionism of all kinds becomes rampant, and everyone loses. From the university's standpoint, cooperative projects with industry affect graduate (and even undergraduate) work in healthy ways. To use Harvey Brooks's phrase, giving students "respect for applied problems" is an important part of their education. Wisdom begins when students (and even professors) realize that an invention is not a product and a product is not an industry. What is perhaps most at stake is attracting some of the ablest young people to those fields that can make a difference in the survival of our society. Particle physics ought to be done, just as art galleries ought to be maintained, and the richer the country is the more particle physics and art galleries it should support. But it would be a disaster if protectionism, of either the government or the industry variety, were to discourage some of the best young people from going into applied fields.

Universities are resilient institutions. We are sufficiently strong in depth that we can afford to experiment. If we move too fast or in an inappropriate direction, we can pull back. Our resilience means that we do not have to be so protectionist that we become precious. After all, what we properly call "integrity" the rest of the world calls "selfishness." Incidentally, I prefer Eric Ashby's words "inner logic" to "integrity." We must be careful to preserve our inner logic, certainly, and incidentally our 501(c)3 status (or the similar tax-exempt status of our affiliated foundations). But the public at large is less interested in the precise boundaries between universities and industry or universities and government; after all, the public is paying for *all* of these entities. Above all we should indulge in protectionism of a higher sort: We should protect our willingness and ability to take risks, to experiment, to undertake new directions, and to help a new generation prepare themselves for lives of service.—ROBERT L. SPROULL, *President, University of Rochester, Rochester, New York 14627*

Adapted from an address at the Conference on University-Industry Relations, Madison, Wisconsin, 16 November 1982.