The University and Controversial Research

by James C. Barron

By law, regulation, and history, research and extension functions in land grant universities (LGUs) have addressed agricultural more than other sectors of society. Although it does not necessarily follow, many agricultural people and organizations expect LGUs to be their supporter and advocate. And when faculty undertake research to analyze the effects of public policy decisions, they risk attracting criticism to the university by agricultural interests made worse off by those policies. The offended party may pressure university administrators to disavow the results and/or sanction the researchers. This pressure may be accompanied by factual challenges to the research methods and findings, arguments that university researchers should avoid politically charged issues, or threats to withdraw future political and financial support for the university based on the power position of the petitioner. These cases are usually presented using the adversary process of the court system. The parties make no claim to balanced evaluation of issues but rather concentrate on what favors their position or discredits the research in question. LGU administrators must be politically adept to maintain the university's public and private support while at the same time creating an environment for high-quality teaching, research, and public service.

What are the proper roles of universities and, more specifically, administrators, faculty, and public officials, as LGUs pursue research on public policy issues? This question goes back to at least the mid 1940s when dairy interests in Iowa challenged the research and findings about the substitutability of oleo margarine for butter. In that brouhaha, T.W. Schultz, head of the Department of Economics at Iowa State College (and who would later receive the Nobel prize in economics), defended his department's research on oleo margarine and set off a much-hearlded discussion on academic freedom (see the Schultz article by Raymond Beneke in this issue). Similarly, in Arizona, economic research in the 1960s and 1970s questioned the economic justification of the costly Central Arizona Project (CAP). The CAP was to (and did) bring water from the Colorado River to central Arizona farmlands. The research set off a firestorm of criticism directed at the university and the researchers involved, a story told by Paul Wilson in the July 1997 *Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics*. In the 1970s and 1980s, Norm Whittlesey and colleagues at Washington State University were vilified by pro-irrigation interests for their research that showed that the economic benefits of a half-million-acre addition to the Columbia Basin Project were significantly less than the added costs. Their work almost certainly saved the state over a hundred million dollars it might otherwise have invested in the proposed expansion. Today we still find controversy over public policy research, including that on grass burning in Washington (see sidebar), and I expect the number of incidents and fierceness of debate may, in fact, increase over time. Universities and public officials must be prepared with a well-grounded understanding of their roles.

Universities must act, but carefully

By one option, universities should avoid research on controversial public issues. Under this rule, presidents and deans may sleep better at night, but social responsibility is abdicated. The LGU tradition of responding to the problems of society argues against avoiding controversial work. If the university chooses not to do such research, it leaves itself wide open to the charge of academic irrelevance.

The university might, under a second option, pick and choose those issues in which it is willing to go forward based on resources available. In many cases, the short time line for a public decision could

Bluegrass burning on Rathdrum Prairie.

invite problems because hurried, but complicated, analytical work carries greater potential for error. Even if researchers avoid errors, quick analyses may be based on a smaller amount of data, making it harder to defend. Universities might insist on having adequate time to carry out the work to guard against these dangers. In cases where there is a likelihood of serious controversy and the time line cannot be extended, the university might legitimately say no to requests for research. The key criteria should include having the relevant area(s) of expertise, reasonable time horizons, and adequate financial support.

The university might also guard against criticism with an ongoing review of the analysis and report. This will require extra resources and more time, but the rewards may be worth the cost. In some cases, if work is subjected to serious criticism, the university can and should arrange for an impartial review by qualified scientists who do not have a connection to the work or the researchers who carried it out.

Another option would involve interested parties during the research process to provide greater understanding of how and why the research is being conducted. This carries its own dangers of stimulating controversy but may be helpful in the longer run by forestalling later complaints.

Over several decades, as both a faculty member and administrator, I have witnessed LGU research and extension on controversial public policies, including the research on public policy to limit the burning of bluegrass fields in Washington. Based on my experience, some "rules of the road" may help administrators, faculty, and public officials successfully address controversial public policy issues.

Administrators

- First, administrators should insist that the university does not take positions on public issues and make every effort to convey this to faculty, legislators, and the public. A university is a collection of scholars seeking to better understand the biological, physical, political, economic, and social world around them. It is ludicrous to think that there could be some common position among all faculty. The nature of research is to question, to probe, and try to prove things wrong.
- Administrators should support an open, two-way communication between faculty, legislators, public officials, and the general public on matters involving the expertise of the faculty. Administrators sometimes try to put themselves between the faculty and the political process, but this is almost certain to fail and may simply lead to more unnecessary conflict within the university and with the public.
- Administrators should insist that work on public policy issues, however controversial, is within the purview of the university as it seeks to meet its

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social obligation to the public which supports and funds it. Indeed, when done well, that research is a most valuable contribution of the university.

- Administrators should acknowledge the fact that the university exists at the pleasure of "the public," but the definition of public should remain as broad as possible. Administrators must constantly disavow assertions that any part of the university should be expected to act only in the interests of some groups in the public.
- Administrators should make good science their highest priority.
- Administrators should insist that the university will take no action in response to challenges of research results where those challenges are not supported by scientifically competent, third party reviewers.
- Administrators should be prepared to support and fund special third party reviews of controversial work in selected cases.

Faculty

- Faculty should recognize that LGUs and their administrators *must*, if LGUs are to continue to function as in the past, retain support by the public and legislative decision-making bodies. Deans, provosts, and presidents do not have an unlimited amount of political capital, and they sometimes must decide which battles to pursue. Their highest priority should be good science. There will be no science at all if the social contract between the university and the public is broken and support withers away.
- Faculty should inform administrators as soon as possible of research results which may antagonize particular interest groups.
- Faculty should not launch personal political crusades with their research. The research should stand or fall on its merits. Just as administrators should insist that no part of the university is beholden to particular interest groups, neither should faculty members seek to cater to narrow parochial interests of particular groups.
- Faculty should be prepared to provide their information, results, and expertise to any and all people involved in or affected by the public decision regardless of political, economic, or social affiliation.
- Faculty must strive to be objective. Everyone has a value and belief system that will influence the work they do and how they conduct it. Faculty must understand their own values and not let them dictate the results independent of the analysis.
- Faculty should understand and acknowledge the legitimacy of a public policy decision-making process which blends many different factors into the ultimate decisions. The political decision process is not subject to the same standards or rules as

Where There Is Smoke There Is Fire

The author, as a faculty member and a department chair, has had ample experience with controversy over research and extension programs. Research funded by the Washington Department of Ecology, and the controversy that followed, prompted this paper. In the research, agricultural economists identified the expected benefits and costs of a proposed two-thirds reduction of bluegrass seed field acreage burned each year after harvest. Most of the grass seed production in Washington is located south and west of Spokane, Washington, and Coeur d' Alene, Idaho, and the prevailing winds carry smoke toward those urban areas.

Under the proposed restriction on grass burning, the farmers and processors who would bear the costs are far fewer than the nonfarm residents who would reap benefits. The research showed that the expected benefits of the reduction exceeded the expected costs, although the results were expressed as ranges and did show a tiny area of overlap. Researchers assessed benefits using a contingent valuation telephone survey. They estimated costs to the industry using enterprise budgeting and interindustry methods of analysis.

When the results were made public the grass seed industry rapidly responded and complained vigorously. The industry requested that the university disavow the research. Private interests threatened to withhold funds they were expected to provide in support of other research in the College of Agriculture and Home Economics. Letters, telephone calls, and personal contacts to the dean and department chair came almost daily for several weeks. University officials wanted to assuage the concerns of important donors, but, of course, they could not repudiate the research findings as they were being asked to do.

As chair of department, I decided early in this storm of complaints that we should have an external review of the research by a panel of people outside the state and unconnected to any of the researchers. The dean and provost supported a review. This decision created almost as much uproar as the research itself. The press wrote about the pressure the university was receiving and fanned the embers. Some in the grass seed industry complained that the review would not be fair to them while anti-burning activists complained that we were caving in to the industry and would rescind the earlier results. Conflict arose on the campus as some faculty felt it a betrayal of the researchers to have such a review. The researchers involved in the study were understandably nervous and apprehensive about the review, because economics provides ample room for different views and interpretations, especially on something like contingent valuation research. The review was conducted by a six-person panel with all their direction and coordination done by one member of the panel itself. The panel unanimously found that the research was appropriately conducted, the methods were appropriate to the issue, and the results were fully consistent with the data.

It is not clear that the review was precisely the right thing to do, but it did help defuse the controversy. It also prompted me to write this article in an attempt to clarify the expectations of land grant universities and those involved—administrators, faculty, and public officials—when the potential for controversy exists.

Low-emission diesel burn.

the research process. Legitimate, political reasons may overshadow "economic" reasons for a policy choice. Choices that may be complicated by political weighting often deal with (1) the distribution of gains and losses among groups, (2) the "psychic costs" of change, (3) nonmarket values such as the value of clean air, and/or (4) values and costs to future generations.

- Faculty should recognize that errors may be made and bad science may creep in. University administrators should not support bad science to protect the faculty.

Public officials

- Officials should seek to understand the scientific process, at least in general, to enable them to know how and when to seek and use scientific analysis.
- Officials should recognize that the processes governing research differ from the adversarial political process. They should further distinguish inputs to the public decision process that have been prepared explicitly for use in an adversary proceeding from those which have not. Virtually all university research should be in the latter category. It is important that the adversary processes not be used to generate unwarranted discredit to the universities and researchers involved merely for the sake of political gain. The public interest will not be well served under such an outcome.
- Officials should understand that a university does not, and cannot, take official positions on matters of public policy. But individual faculty should be free to provide input to the public debate on the consequences of alternative policies.

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Seek the truth

Public policy often creates both winners and losers. Winners may gain political power, tax reductions, government subsidies, access to or control of natural resources, monetary savings from reduction or elimination of regulations, government contracts, protection from pollution, or other benefits. Others may lose these benefits. In this environment, the battles may be fierce and the principles of honesty, respect, and decorum fall by the wayside. Despite these dangers, it is the job of university faculty and administrators to support and seek the truth wherever that path leads. ◙