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Do as We Say: Funders' Invisible Hold Over Research

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Abstract: *This roundtable is an open discussion of the commercialization of academic work, namely how funders' expectations have the possibility of driving research outcomes. By exploring the possible ramifications the expectations funders have of our research outcomes, we can avoid contributing to the increasing commercialization of research*

Over the past 30 years, there has been a paradigm war within educational research focusing mainly on research credibility (Gibbons & Sanderson, 2002). Positivist researchers using quantitative methods have argued that qualitative researchers are too close to their participants, resulting in lack of objectivity and generalizability. Conversely, interpretivist researchers using qualitative methods see positivist research as insufficiently credible due to its gross assumptions that its methods are value-neutral and therefore the knowledge gained reflects truth.

While the paradigm war has certainly received abundant attention in academe, there is another dynamic increasingly at play that constitutes a potential threat to the credibility of academic research: satisfying the stakeholder that provided the funding for the research. This has been called commercialization of academic work (Wood, 1992). This commercialization has occurred for a number of reasons. Some of these reasons include the researchers increased dependence on funding (Bogler, 2000), the effects funding has on career advancement (Sheridan, Slocum, Buda, & Thompson, 1990), and the issue of multiple loyalties researchers have when using grants (Sciulli, 2001). Unfortunately, this commercialization of academic work and the role of funders' expectations on research outcomes have not received the attention they deserve.

A recently published example of researcher and funder at odd is Baylis (2004). Baylis (2004) describes in detail the case of a hospital researcher who found unexpected risks as a result of clinical trials of a new drug. The pharmaceutical company that had developed the drug and had funded the research attempted to suppress the findings, and threatened legal action if the findings were made public. We understand that this example is from the medical field, but we believe that we in the field of adult education are not immune to the same pressure.

Questions we believe the adult education field needs to start asking include: What can adult educators learn from these examples? Are we as immune to such pressures as we thought we were? How are our research findings, whether we use quantitative or qualitative methods, influenced by funding pressure? Obviously these questions need to be addressed by all of us, especially given the fact that more and more of us require some sort of external funding to support our research (Caldert, 1983).

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