

## Dean's Task Force on Private Sector Engagement

June 30, 2020

### Task Force Members

George Annas, JD, MPH, William Fairfield Warren Professor of Health Law, Ethics, and Human Rights

Birgit Claus Henn, ScD, Assistant Professor of Environmental Health

Vanessa Boland Edouard, MPH, MBA, Managing Director, idea hub

Kathryn Lunetta, PhD, Professor of Biostatistics

Nason Maani BSc, MSc, PhD, FRSA, Harkness Fellow in Health Care Policy and Practice

Michael McClean, ScD, Associate Dean of Research and Faculty Advancement (Chair)

Elaine Nsoesie, PhD, MS, Assistant Professor of Global Health

Joseph Palmisano, MA, MPH, Associate Director, Biostatistics and Epidemiology Data Analytics Center

Craig Ross, PhD, MBA, Executive Director, idea hub, and Research Assistant Professor of Epidemiology

Michael Siegel, MD, Professor of Community Health Sciences



## Introduction

Academic public health has historically linked itself with public sector actors, with nearly all funds coming to universities, including Boston University, from governmental and foundation sources. Three evolutions are changing that, which have implications for our school. First, as the research landscape evolves, schools of public health are engaging more than ever with non-traditional funders to carry out innovative science. This involves a variety of private sector actors who bring different expectations of our work. Second, structurally we have been developing idea hub to facilitate engagement with less traditional partners, creating opportunities that can be leveraged by our community. Third, we are evolving our philanthropic efforts to create more opportunities for alternate revenue streams for the school. These efforts have potential to create novel and useful avenues for our scholarship, education, and practice.

Challenges may arise when we engage with sectors that are less familiar to us. To identify these challenges and lessons learned, task force members consulted our community widely, including faculty and staff with experience partnering with the private sector, considered best practices from peer institutions, and reviewed the scholarly literature to develop guidelines that can inform and shape our private sector engagement going forward. We are grateful to our community members for their insight and contributions to this effort.

Finally, as a means of providing concrete, actionable steps to maximize the potential benefits while avoiding consequences that could be harmful to individual faculty and the school's broader mission, this report includes principles and a process for engaging with the private sector. These recommendations reflect knowledge and practices at the time of this report; they should be updated and adapted as partnerships with the private sector evolve.

### 1. Benefits of Private Sector Engagement

The Boston University School of Public Health (BUSPH) has a growing portfolio of research and scholarship funded largely by government and foundation sources. Though funding from the private sector has historically accounted for only a small portion of our portfolio, such projects often provide opportunities to advance the **mission** of the school in ways that would not be possible via traditional sources.<sup>1</sup> The benefits of increased engagement with the private sector include:

- opportunities for faculty to gain insights from industry leaders outside of academia who may have different approaches and methods to addressing problems. Private sector partnerships facilitate research and innovation through exchange and sharing of knowledge, technology, and resources. Importantly, private sector partners may have access to unique data resources that can be utilized by faculty in research studies.<sup>2, 3, 4</sup>
- scholarship in topic areas that are difficult to fund through traditional government or foundation sources. One key example is the development of research infrastructure such as data collection platforms, knowledge bases, computing platforms, specialized laboratories, or research centers. Private industry may benefit from scholarly activities associated with this research infrastructure and provide funding to support these activities.<sup>1, 3, 4</sup>

- student scholarship through practica and research internships. Private sector partners are keen on accessing highly trained talent, and students are interested in gaining relevant experience that makes them desirable to employers. Private sector partners may fund doctoral students who wish to focus research in areas of particular interest to a company.<sup>5</sup>
- opportunities for faculty to integrate more real-world problems and solutions into their teaching. Private sector partners may be sources of experts who could guest lecture in classrooms, case studies for didactic purposes, and access to data and technology to be used in the classroom.<sup>5</sup>
- greater impact on population health by translating scholarship into products and services. Instead of knowledge being locked up in scholarly papers, industry may work with faculty scholars to apply the knowledge in ways that allow them to benefit commercially through new products and services, and benefit the public with a faster path to improved health.<sup>1, 4</sup>

Finally, private sector collaborations provide an additional source of revenue to fuel research, teaching, and practice activities at BUSPH. Competition for federal funds are fierce and funds from private foundations often do not cover the university overhead costs needed to maintain research operations. Thus, in addition to the benefits described above, private sector funding can be an important component of a diverse and balanced external funding portfolio.

## 2. Potential Pitfalls, Conflicts, and Challenges; Lessons Learned

Challenges may arise when we engage with sectors that are less familiar to us. There is a growing body of scientific literature concerning the divergence between public health and commercial interests, and the resultant direct and distal consequences to research, practice, and population health. Here we summarize some of the potential problems that may arise with corporate-funded research in cases where the proper provisions are not in place to avoid such issues.

### **Private sector funding may steer the research agenda away from public health.<sup>1,6</sup>**

Private sector sponsors often use research funding to control the overall national research agenda. Because academic research funding is limited, offering research funds allows corporations to dictate or strongly influence the type of research conducted and the specific research questions to be explored.<sup>1, 6, 7</sup> For example, the tobacco industry used its research funding to steer academic research away from investigation of the role of the tobacco industry in harming the public's health and towards issues such as personal responsibility, the role of genetic factors, and the danger of air pollution.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the alcohol industry has used research funding to steer the agenda towards studying the potential benefits of moderate drinking and away from topics such as the cancer risks of low-level alcohol consumption.<sup>9, 10</sup>

While from the perspective of an individual university or school it may appear that the industry's particular research project has scientific merit, their project may actually be just a small part of a much larger strategy to control the scientific research agenda and protect industry interests. In that sense, the purpose for the research is not a legitimate quest for scientific knowledge but is instead to serve a part of an industry public relations, marketing, and/or litigation protection strategy.<sup>7, 11</sup>

**Private sector funding may be designed primarily to improve public image and increase political influence to block measures counter to their interests.<sup>12</sup>**

Engagement with partners whose funding or partnerships appear to be altruistic or to represent legitimate scientific inquiry may in fact be intended to further a company's public image and to help it build relationships to block legislative and other policy measures that are not in the company's interest.<sup>7, 12</sup> For example, the soda industry has funded physical activity research and programs by universities and organizations that might ordinarily be advocating for policies to reduce soda consumption.<sup>11</sup> However, accepting this funding limits the ability of these institutions to promote such policies, either consciously to avoid losing the funding or subconsciously because of a developed feeling of good will toward the sponsor.<sup>13</sup> Thus, when the soda industry funds an organization like the American Diabetes Association or American Dietetic Association, it may to some extent buy the silence of this organization on policies that would aim to prevent type II diabetes by limiting soda consumption.<sup>12</sup>

**Private sector funding may compromise the mission of the academic institution.**

Some companies have a basic underlying mission that is inherently in conflict with the protection of the public's health. Accepting funding or partnering with these companies might be perceived as compromising the underlying mission of the school.<sup>1,6</sup> For example, a school of public health that accepts funding from the fossil fuel industry is arguably undermining its mission of addressing the problem of climate change. Similarly, as cigarettes are an inherently dangerous product with no health benefits, accepting tobacco industry funding could be construed as being inconsistent with the mission of a school of public health.<sup>8</sup>

**Accepting private sector funding or partnering with industry may harm the reputation of the school or university by creating negative publicity, loss of trust, or loss of community support.**

Accepting funding from companies that do not seek to improve the health of communities could lead to a loss of public trust in the school or the university.<sup>5</sup> Such relationships might be perceived as a conflict of interest, conflict of commitment, or conflict of academic interests.<sup>14</sup>

**Private sector funding of research may result in compromising research integrity.**

While an individual researcher may view themselves as being objective regardless of their funder, there is considerable scientific evidence to show that corporate funded research can be heavily biased towards the interests of the sponsor.<sup>14</sup> This subconscious bias may undermine the scientific integrity of the research. Less subtle is the potential for direct compromise of research integrity through the influence of the corporate sponsor on the conduct and reporting of the research.<sup>7,8,10</sup> There have been many examples of the suppression of negative results, restricted access to data, private sector interference with the reporting of research findings, violation of academic freedom, and threats to open science and knowledge sharing.<sup>1,8</sup>

**Private sector funding may entail financial risk.**

There may be a financial risk associated with the acceptance of corporate funding. First, the ability of the funder to continue to support the project may change abruptly based on the financial condition of the entity or shifting priorities of the entity. Second, there is a risk of funding withdrawal if the funder is unhappy with the results or the pace of the project.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Principles for Engaging with the Private Sector

To avoid the above pitfalls, we propose the following principles to guide a researcher and the school in considering partnerships with industry.<sup>6</sup> These principles should be applied in addition to the **university policies and guidelines**, which take precedence over policies and guidance at the school level.

**Principle 1: SPH will not accept funding from any corporation, foundation, or other entity whose business practices or mission statement includes goals, actions and/or products that undermine or compromise the health of populations.<sup>7</sup>**

Before engaging with private industry, the researchers and school should evaluate adherence to this principle by considering questions such as:

- Does the entity's mission align with the BU/BUSPH mission? <sup>1,4,11,12,15</sup>
- Does the entity engage with partners or support programs that are contrary to the SPH mission?
- To what extent is there a reputational risk to SPH due to the *perception* that our proposed engagement with the entity would be in conflict with SPH's mission?<sup>5</sup>
- What are the core commercial interests of the entity (i.e., what products or services does it rely on for revenue?) Are any of those products or services harmful to population health?  
<sup>1,4,11</sup>
- What are the core obligations of the entity (e.g., to members if a trade association, to customers if a manufacturer, to clients if a marketing or legal firm, etc.)? <sup>10,15</sup>
- Is the proposed project part of a larger company initiative? What public relations, marketing, or agenda-setting functions could this project serve for the company? <sup>4, 7, 10, 11, 14</sup>

**Principle 2: SPH will not engage in collaborations that threaten academic freedom or rigor.<sup>1,5</sup>**

Before engaging with private industry, the researchers and school should evaluate adherence to this principle by considering questions such as:

- Will this collaboration result in any restrictions on our ability to design, conduct, or communicate our work? <sup>1,5</sup>
- Does the entity have a favorable track record of collaboration with past partners?
- Does the entity dispute other well-established research findings?
- Can we negotiate objectives, scope, budget, and agreements with the entity that will preserve academic freedom and rigor? <sup>16</sup>
- Will the entity require the investigator to share manuscripts with them before they are submitted for publication? If so, for what purpose and under what conditions? <sup>1</sup>
- Will it be possible to agree on a plan for research conduct, publication, data ownership, and results messaging? <sup>4,17</sup>
- Will it be possible to define and agree on quality metrics deliverables (academic vs commercial rigor)? <sup>4, 15</sup>

**Principle 3: BUSPH will collaborate with external partners to establish project objectives that are in alignment with the missions of Boston University and the School of Public Health. All agreement**

**details (e.g., scope of work, budget, description of how the two entities will communicate, deliverable timelines, etc.) must be executed prior to acceptance of project funding and commencement of project activities.**<sup>1, 4, 6, 10, 11, 14</sup>

Before engaging with private industry, the researchers and school should evaluate adherence to this principle by considering questions such as:

- Are the project objectives consistent with the underlying mission of BU and BUSPH?<sup>1, 4, 11, 14</sup>
- Is the entity financially stable, and able to meet terms of the financial agreement?<sup>4</sup>
- Have we engaged with appropriate internal collaborators in the development of agreements and identification of resources to successfully meet the project objectives?
- Have we included comprehensive protection for the university, school, and project personnel in all contracts?

**Principle 4: SPH and private sector researchers will declare all conflicts of interest (COI) and disclosures. Transparency will guide all interactions.**<sup>18, 19</sup>

Before engaging with private industry, the researchers and school should evaluate adherence to this principle by considering questions such as:

- What criteria should be used to determine COI in this setting?<sup>1</sup>
- What will be the mechanism for monitoring and disclosing conflicts of interests?<sup>4</sup>
- Do we have any COI based on **Boston University policies**?
- What aspects of this project are considered confidential and why? Is this based on an agreement between SPH and the industry collaborator?<sup>4</sup>
- Can we publicly document the research protocol, including any changes made while conducting the study?
- Do we have an agreement on intellectual property (e.g., data ownership, publications, reports and any other technology or commercial products, etc.) resulting from this work?
- What is the plan for disclosing private sector funders in communications about the project (e.g., publications, reports, presentations, media, etc.)?

#### **4. Process for Engaging with the Private Sector**

To operationalize the above, the task force recommends that SPH implement a two-phase review process, recognizing that potential engagements develop over time in stages. The first phase will focus on the company, addressing principles 1 and 2. The second phase will focus on the project, addressing principles 3 and 4. The rationale for a phased approach is that if a potential engagement is considered inadvisable due to the characteristics of the company, then there is no need to spend time developing a detailed project plan. The task force recommends these reviews be conducted by a committee comprised of faculty from across the school and designated by the Dean. The SPH Research Committee is one example of an existing committee that could be used for this purpose.

## Overview

- All private sector collaborations with a SPH PI must go through the review process, including collaborations where BU is a subcontract from a non-industry partner.
- Industry collaborations may be facilitated by an individual faculty member or idea hub. Faculty are strongly encouraged to use idea hub resources as it decreases the administrative burden for the individual faculty member.
- All documents associated with the review process (proposals, review sheets, and meeting notes) will be maintained by idea hub, following the university's records retention policy.
- The SPH review process will be applied in addition to the existing university review and contract development processes. All university policies and processes supersede school processes.

## SPH Review Process

### Phase 1 Review: Company-level review

- The company will complete a background information form, including their mission, number of employees, revenue sources, and description of how the collaboration with BUSPH aligns with their mission or a company initiative.
- Faculty and/or idea hub will complete a company profile that includes an audit of news stories, blogs, social media, and research publications to address the questions raised in principles 1 and 2 above.

### Phase 2 Review: Project-level review

- Together with the private sector partner, the researcher/idea hub prepares a high-level project description that includes a description of how the proposed project will be managed, a statement of how the project will further the SPH faculty member's professional goals, and an overview of scholarship and/or teaching resources that will be developed through the collaboration. This project description should address the questions raised in principles 3 and 4 above.

The review committee tasked with overseeing this process should develop a comprehensive set of processes and guidelines, including how to mitigate challenges when they arise and how to revise and improve the review process based on committee and investigator feedback. Ongoing collaborations should be reviewed regularly to ensure the company and project still adhere to the principles outlined above. Challenges can present at multiple stages in the collaboration, including after the collaboration has ended.

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Galea S, Saitz R. Funding, Institutional Conflicts of Interest, and Schools of Public Health. *Journal of the American Medical Association* 2017; 317(17): 1735-1736.
- <sup>2</sup> Ankrah S, Omar A. Universities-industry collaboration: A systematic review. *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 2015; 31: 387-408.
- <sup>3</sup> Gann D, Montessoro F, Eisenberg J. 3 ways to nurture collaboration between universities and industry. *World Economic Forum*. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/11/3-ways-to-nurture-collaboration-between-universities-and-industry/>. Published 23 Nov 2018. Accessed June 18, 2020.
- <sup>4</sup> George Mason University. A Directory of Leading Companies Partnering with Colleges and Universities for Strategic and Financial Impact. *P3 EDU 100* April 3-4, 2018.
- <sup>5</sup> Bayer R, Sampat B. Corporate funding for schools of public health: Confronting the ethical and economic challenges. *American Journal of Public Health* 2016; 106(4): 615-618.
- <sup>6</sup> Fabbri A, Lai A, Bpharm, Grundy Q, Bero LA. The Influence of Industry Sponsorship on the Research Agenda: A Scoping Review. *American Journal of Public Health* 2018; 108(11): 9-16.
- <sup>7</sup> Hessari N, Ruskin G, McKee M, Stuckler D. Public Meets Private: Conversations Between Coca-Cola and the CDC. *The Milbank Quarterly* 2019; 97(1):74-90.
- <sup>8</sup> Rosenberg N, Siegel M. Use of corporate sponsorship as a tobacco marketing tool: a review of tobacco industry sponsorship in the USA, 1995-99. *Tobacco Control* 2001; 10: 239-246.
- <sup>10</sup> Petticrew M, Hessari N, Knai C, Weiderpass E. The strategies of alcohol industry SAPROs: Inaccurate information, misleading language and the use of confounders to downplay and misrepresent the risk of cancer. *Drug and Alcohol Review* 2018; 37: 313-315.
- <sup>11</sup> Hessari N, van Schalkwyk M, Thomas S, Petticrew M. Alcohol Industry CSR Organizations: What Can Their Twitter Activity Tell Us about Their Independence and Their Priorities? A Comparative Analysis. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 2019; 16(892).
- <sup>12</sup> Gomez L, Jacoby E, Ibarra L, Lucumi D, Hernandez A, Parra D, Florindo A, Hallal P. Sponsorship of physical activity programs by the sweetened beverages industry: public health or public relations? *Rev Saude Publica* 2011; 45(2).
- <sup>13</sup> Aaron DG, Siegel MB. Sponsorship of national health organizations by major soda companies. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 2017; 52(1):20-30.
- <sup>14</sup> American Association of University Professors. *Recommended Principles to Guide Academy-Industry Relationships*. University of Illinois Press, 2014.

---

<sup>15</sup> Jane B, Gibson K. Corporate sponsorship of physical activity promotion programmes: part of the solution or part of the problem? *Journal of Public Health* 2017; 40(2):279-288.

<sup>16</sup> Brisbois B, Cole D, Davison C, Ruggiero E, Handon L, Janes C, Larson C, Nixon S, Palmaondon K, Stime B. Corporate sponsorship of global health research: Questions to promote critical thinking about potential funding relationships. *Revue Canadienne de Santé Publique* 2016; 107 (4-5):390-392.

<sup>17</sup> Flight Attendant Medical Research Institute, Inc., Grant Agreement. <http://www.famri.org/core/>. Accessed January 8, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> D'Hooghe T. Transparent collaboration between industry and academia can serve unmet patient need and contribute to reproductive public health. *Human Reproduction* 2017; 32(8): 1549-1555.

<sup>19</sup> Belluz J, Buissonniere M. How McKinsey infiltrated the world of global public health. *Vox Media*. <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2019/12/13/21004456/bill-gates-mckinsey-global-public-health-bcg>. Published December 13, 2019. Accessed January 8, 2020.