

Donor-Funded or Corporate-Funded Research: Is One Better Than the Other?

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While budget-strapped researchers may be willing to accept funds from either non-profit donors or corporate sources, critics are increasingly concerned about the price that is paid in such bargains.

Will you be given the autonomy to pursue the research protocol you have designed, or will you be expected to perform the tasks assigned and to deliver specific results on deadline?

In an increasingly competitive market for research funding and resources, can academic researchers still afford to stand on principle and demand complete autonomy? A tenured researcher at a prestigious institution may well be able to name his or her price, but for new researchers who are not part of a government-funded institution, the options are donor-funded or corporate-funded research.

Conflicts of Interest

Any scenario in which a funding source has a vested interest in the outcome of the research raises concerns about [conflicts of interest](#). Can the research be truly objective?

Any research protocol must take steps to ensure that all conflicts of interests are being addressed, regardless of the funding source. It's only logical that a cancer research charity should fund cancer research. That's why the organization exists, and the members and supporters who contributed that money are usually either cancer survivors, patients, or have a personal connection to the disease. However, the scenario gets a little more complicated when we consider the variables of corporate-funded research.

The Tarnish of Profit

Charity donors expect to see evidence of their donations being put to efficient use. How much is spent in overhead, and how much is put to good work? For corporations, shareholders have invested their money in expectation of a profit—the classic risk-reward model. That expectation of profit may unfairly influence the areas of research that gain attention—specifically a preference for applied research projects that have a greater chance of producing treatments, drugs or equipment that are likely to generate profits for the corporation providing the funding.

In terms of research practice, that profit expectation can produce an emphasis on applied over basic research that, by definition, contributes to the body of research knowledge without necessarily delivering a marketable product. Of greater concern is the question as to whether the need to provide a return on invested dollars equates to undue influence and pressure for a positive outcome that may in turn, create a research bias.

Donors Are in it for the Long Term

Advocates for the allegedly less-commercial research that is donor-funded argue that donors are more patient in their expectation of results. However, research funding is a long-term relationship, not a one-off financial transaction. For those funds to continue year-after-year, researchers must show progress, regardless of the funding source.

Research Integrity Above All Else

Research ethics experts will no doubt continue to debate the relative merits of donor funding over corporate funding, but for the researchers facing the daunting task of finding that funding, the ethical issue is more personal. What compromises will they be willing to make in order to get the research up and running? The quality and [integrity of the research process](#) have to remain above reproach, so to what extent will those researchers be willing to modify their original topics in order to win that funding?

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