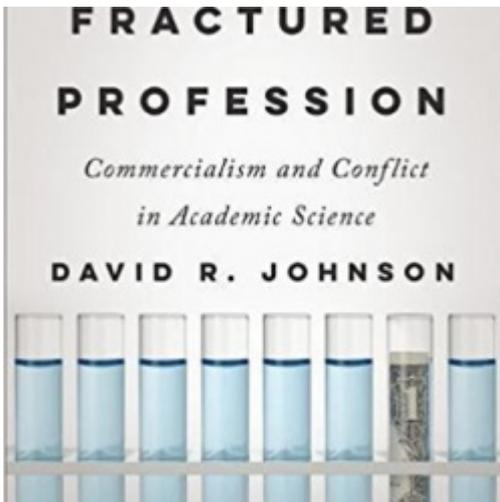


Corporate Funding - The New Status Symbol For Academic Scientists



By Hank Campbell — December 22, 2017



Once upon a time, a corporate grant was the ultimate status symbol for a university scholar. Companies don't spend money foolishly and a corporate grant was a sign that you were esteemed in your field.

Then, as academia became more politically one-sided and government took more control over it using funding, the mentality changed. You were less ethical if you got corporate money, you must be fabricating a result for industry leash-holders. Only government grants were pure.

A new generation of scientists, whose careers have been delayed because so many of their peers also want to do "ethical" government-funded science rather than work in the private sector, are less blinded by such ideology. They have looked around and seen starvation wages for post-docs into their 40s, and recognized that the only way a government grant can go up is if some other lab in academia fails, or already over-burdened people pay more taxes. In government grants, politics counts as much as scholarship, whereas in the corporate sector it's more of a meritocracy.

And so academic science is beginning to switch back to being more politically mainstream and with that change comes more mature beliefs about the private sector. Yes, the tenured leaders remain overwhelmingly one-sided politically, just like they remain overwhelmingly white men. But people have to retire eventually. When that happens, it will be harder for academics who want to select for their ideology to do so if the talent pool is more diverse.

As they wait for ideological diversity to occur, scholars in any applied field are looking to corporations to fill the funding gaps, and so an industry grant has become the new status symbol.

What about those tired claims that corporations fund pay-for-results determined by corporate

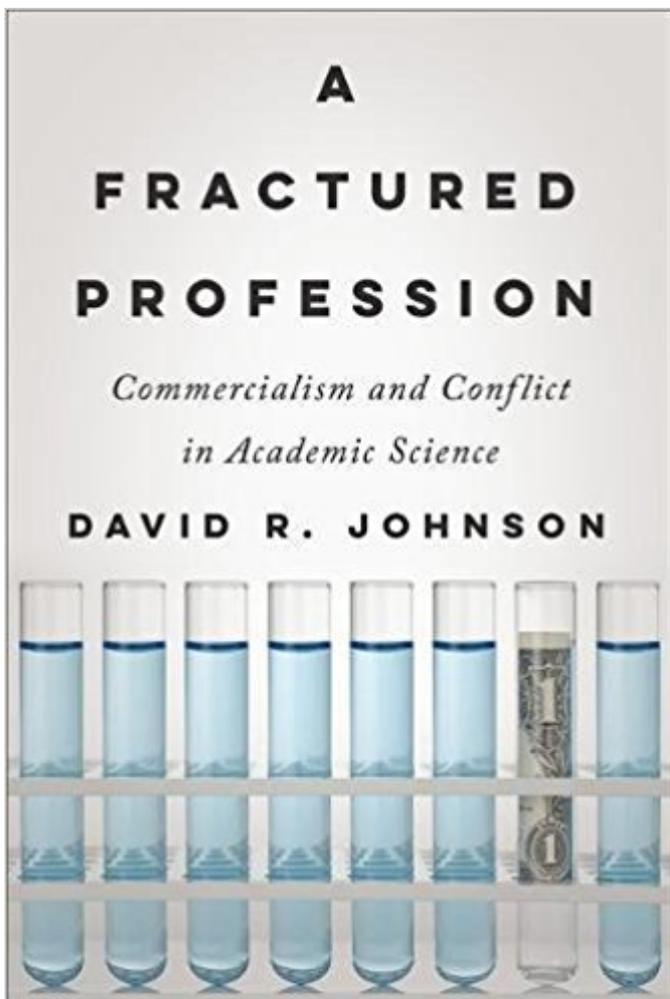
marketing groups? That was always instead marketing by dozens of government institutions who have spent \$5 billion this century convincing graduate students that academia - and government grants - are the place to be. They want the best scientists working for them, not corporations, without them becoming part of a government union. And, if we're being honest, some investigators manipulated post-doctoral scientists into working for basically nothing tugging on academic sentimentality.

The reality is that corporations still fund half of "blue sky thinking." And in industries where academia and government would take far too long, like drug development, industry funds all of it. Companies have always recognized that research that led to Magnetic Resonance Imaging, PET scans and GPS technology did not have an application in mind. They simply abdicated half of it because if the government is willing to spread the risk among hundreds of millions of taxpayers, it is foolish to take on the risk for just their own shareholders.

In "[A Fractured Profession: Commercialism and Conflict in Academic Science](#) ^[1]", University of Nevada, Reno College of Education Assistant Professor David R. Johnson discusses the reemergence of corporations in basic research and what that means for the work of academic scientists. The ultimate status symbol for the future could be being known as the woman behind a hugely successful commercial field. Look at the fight over CRISPR, it's all academics who want to create a corporate giant.

"How do you stand out in a chemistry or biology department where most of your peers publish in prestigious journals? Commercialization is a new basis of status and power in science, with an elite stratum of scientists who wield power by shaping the technological direction of major corporations," Johnson says.

Idealists also have a way to embrace the idea of corporate grants: If you want to make change, become part of the solution for a company and help them do the right thing.



[1]

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Fractured Profession: Commercialism and Conflict in Academic Science