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Reflections of Academics on the Ethics of University Military Research

Abstract

The article examines the ways that university military research violates the tenets of academic freedom and communication. Interviews with academics are used to raise concerns about the extent to which military research conflicts with the academic mission. The author includes an examination of specific cases where professors and students have challenged the militarization of research on university campuses.

Keywords

Military Research, University, Ethics

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Concern over the ethics of university military research goes back to the Vietnam War era, and more recent U.S. military involvements in Iraq and Afghanistan have invoked similar questions. Student and community objections to military research on campuses have again been voiced, particularly at Johns Hopkins University (1, 2).

At the same time, new generations of university researchers are accommodating themselves to the needs of classified and restricted military research. According to the National Science Foundation (NSF) (3) the US Department of Defense (DoD) provided \$3.4 billion in research and development funding to universities and colleges in fiscal year 2009.

In the US, \$80 billion per year (4) is spent on defense research and development alone. To gauge the size of that amount, consider that it exceeds the grand total of all defense spending by Russia, China, and India combined. During 2012, the top recipients of US Defense Department funding were: Johns Hopkins University (\$603 million) (5), the University of Texas at Austin (\$122 million), Massachusetts Institute of Technology (\$111 million), Stanford University (\$72 million), and the University of California at San Diego (\$64 million).

Classified research is widely thought to be inappropriate for universities. As a result, the largest recipient of US DoD dollars -- Johns Hopkins University -- made an official commitment affirming that "no classified research will be carried out on any academic campus" of the University, although the Johns Hopkins' Applied Physics Laboratory is explicitly excluded (6).

The University of Virginia's policy on classified research begins by stating that such research contradicts "freedom of communication of ideas and information in all areas of academic endeavor." Since classified research cannot be disclosed to the public, it cannot be subjected to scientific or community discussion. In secret and without social input, the societal, ethical, and environmental implications of such research cannot be fully discussed and democratically controlled. The University of Virginia's rather convoluted Federal Classified Research policy (7) is simultaneously an affirmation of, and restriction on, academic freedom.

Most universities pledge to promote public interest and well-being, an obligation frequently echoed in university mission statements. For example, Stanford University, a substantial recipient of US DoD dollars (8), pledges "to promote the public welfare by exercising an influence in behalf of humanity and civilization" (9).

In this context, a six-item survey was conducted to start a discussion among academics and get a glimpse at what some may think about military research at their universities. Given the explosive nature of discussing military research as related to academic freedom, we expected low returns. Universities and colleges were selected at random; so were departments and faculty members. Globally delivered emails totaled 5,178. Once we received 101 responses, we stopped emailing the survey. All responding faculty signed and gave their consent for the result to be made public. In return, each

respondent received an acknowledgment that their input was received. Each item provided four alternative response choices. Respondents could select as many statements as they liked, although virtually all picked just one response per item.

Academics from the U.S., U.K., Canada, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, Denmark, Finland, Turkey, and Iran participated in our survey and offered insight. They represent diverse fields of inquiry. In alphabetical order, these fields included aeronautics and astronautics, architecture, biological sciences and bioethics, biostatistics and epidemiology, business, chemistry, chemical engineering, children's literature, classical studies, computer sciences, creative writing, economics, environmental studies, English, history, international development studies, management, mathematics, nursing, philosophy, physiology, physics, psychology, politics, public health, social policy, sociology, and religion.

Survey results

One focus of the survey was to discover whether academics approve of the status quo in regards to military research. Only 10% said that military research should continue as it currently exists.

In a striking contrast, 92% disagreed (percentages do not always add up to 100% due to omissions and multiple responses to some items in the survey). Of that large percentage who disagreed, 26% said all university military research should be stopped at once, while 22% said university military research, if undertaken at all, should be visible and a regular target for education and protest.

Faculty's views on the impact of military research on academic freedom were also examined. Does military research threaten academic freedom, and, if so, how and to what extent? An overwhelming 60% considered military research to threaten academic freedom. Almost 40% considered that threat to be serious. Only 22% of participants considered military research to be no threat to academic freedom. A similar number (17%) viewed military research as nullifying academic freedom.

All in all, 78% of the academics we surveyed stated that military research threatens or annuls academic freedom.

Desirability and ethics of military research

A full 78% of academics considered military research undesirable. 47% expressed that undesirability by stating that university military research is unethical and against the core values of academic freedom. Only 9% considered military research a desirable way for universities to build their resource bases.

Societal visibility of military research

Our survey also explored the issue of community and campus visibility of military contracts. The great majority of academics (88%) said that universities which accept contracts for military research should be publicly identified. Only 4% said universities should be *required* to make these contracts known only to members of the academic community, and 8% found it acceptable that universities should have some secret contracts.

Acceptance of military contracts should be put to a vote

When asked whether faculty should have a vote on military contracts, 92% answered in the affirmative. A full 64% wanted such votes to be “binding”.

One survey item delved into university drone research. By a large majority, 75% of those responding did not approve of killer drone research; almost 50% said university research on killer drones should be halted. Nearly one-fifth of respondents (19%) said killer drone research should continue but be publicly discussed and democratically controlled. Only 7% said the drone research should continue to help further weapons development.

Highlights of this research

This research highlights academics’ strong desire to have a meaningful vote (even a binding one) on whether or not their university accepts military contracts. We also discovered that the secrecy involved in military research is undesirable to the academic community. An overwhelming majority, 88%, wanted public identification of universities which accept military contracts. The visibility of military research, and democratic control of such research, concerned our participants, half of whom considered military research unethical and against core values of academic freedom.

Concrete impact on academic freedom, on US campuses

According to the *Guardian* (10), last September a Dean at Johns Hopkins University asked Professor Matthew Green to take down his blog post which was critical of the National Security Agency (NSA).

The University later confirmed that someone at their Applied Physics Laboratory had drawn the University’s attention to the blog post (11). The University ended up apologizing for the incident after it was made public.

The same Applied Physics Laboratory received over a billion dollars for research and development (R&D) from the U.S. government, in Fiscal Year 2011 (5). The same lab has also been in the news for its research on military drone technology (12) technology.

For the years 2004 through 2011, federal R&D expenditures exceeded a billion dollars each year at Johns Hopkins alone, according to the National Science Foundation (5).

Based on 2009 statistics, Johns Hopkins University has been the largest recipient (13) of US Department of Defense (DoD) dollars.

Student and community objections have been voiced to this military research in the Johns Hopkins University *News-Letter*, a student-published newspaper (1, 2).

German universities performing research for the Pentagon

Since 2000, more than 22 German universities and research institutes have been recipients of Pentagon funding, totaling \$13.5 million (14). Karlsruhe Institute of Technology has been receiving significant US DoD money (15). Other German universities and research institutes taking DoD money include: The University of Bremen, Munich University, University of the Saar, Marburg University, The Fraunhofer Society, Max Planck Institute, the Alfred Wegener Institute for Polar and Marine Research, Leibniz Institute and Goethe University (14).

Similar to some US universities, many German universities currently involved with the US DoD are violating their own policies which prohibit them from doing research or teaching for military purposes. German universities' commitment to no military contacts is articulated in what is called a "civil clause" (16) that requires the university to conduct research exclusively for peaceful (civilian) purposes and excludes military or civil-military research. Opposing military research at their universities, student activists are working to compel German universities to honor existing civil clauses or to enact new ones to keep military research out of German universities.

Dr. Jürgen Altmann, of the Technical University of Dortmund (Germany), told *Deutsche Welle*: "It's problematic when the science is devoted to war preparation, especially when it's for the US military. After all, the US is waging wars of aggression, and without authorization from the UN Security Council" (17).

Professor William G. Martin of Binghamton University maintains that the military penetration of campuses over the next generation will produce scholars and scholarship dedicated to the so-called "war on terror" (18). Professor Martin argues that such scholarship will be estranged from broader civilian and public needs, that it will normalize a constant state of fear in academia, and that such fear will tend towards the criminalization of critical thinking. He also suggests that a permanent inducement of "national-security" consciousness will poison free academic discussion on campuses.

Conclusion

Academics who participated in the above-referenced survey view military research as endangering academic freedom and compromising ethical research.

Participating academics raised serious questions about the extent to which universities that conduct military research are responsible to principles of academic freedom and the free flow of information. Many respondents felt that their universities' serving the

interests of the public may be compromised when their funding depends on satisfying the demands of military research. This issue's significance merits public discussion and deliberation, if not the institutionalization of procedures for democratic review of campus research.

Dr. Mozghan Savabieasfahani is a native of Iran. Her research focuses on health impacts of war pollutants on targeted populations. She is the author of over two dozen peer-reviewed articles and of the book entitled *Pollution and Reproductive Damage* (DVM 2009).

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