

Sent to the San Francisco Chronicle

To the Editors:

In the essay they wrote for the April 15 edition of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Chancellor Robert Birgeneau and Professor Steven Chu cited a humanistic concern for the poor (“especially the poor of the world”) as one of the driving motivations for having entered what they describe as an “an international competition to land a \$500 million university research contract with the global energy corporation, BP.” (It is important to point out, I think, that this supposed “international competition” consisted of precisely *five* competitors, all selected in advance by BP.) Yet the poor fade into the background when they name the desired outcome of the partnership with BP: to enable the transition of “advanced biofuels” from the laboratory “to the fuel pump.” They also assert that the development of synthetic biofuels will “help to break our growing dependency on imported oil.” From this it seems clear who are being imagined as the primary beneficiaries of the BP-funded research: not the poor of the world—many of whom have little use for “fuel pumps,” since they have relatively little access to motorized transport—but rather, those nations and classes who currently use a disproportionate share of available petroleum-based fuels. That the most conspicuous consumers of the world’s energy resources should be the primary beneficiaries of the proposed research project ought not to surprise us. As a corporation, BP is *supposed* to be devoted to the maximization of profit, and a continued increase in consumption of energy in *some* form contributes to this maximization.

But universities are devoted to the pursuit of knowledge, not of profit. Academic integrity thus also must include the pursuit of knowledge that *may not* be profitable—at least not in a narrowly economic sense. Suppose, for example—and there is some science that supports this supposition—that the most effective way (in terms both of speed and of sustainability) to diminish the dangers of global warming and energy-source depletion is to reduce consumption. Research in pursuit of evidence for this scientific hypothesis is less likely to be funded by energy corporations.

That is one of the chief concerns of faculty who have called for more careful consideration of and wider consultation on the proposed Energy Biosciences Institute. The Institute proposes to fund seven faculty positions devoted to biofuels research. But can the State of California afford to fund seven faculty positions devoted to conservation and sustainability research, to studying the differential effects of biofuels production, distribution, and consumption on industrialized and agricultural populations? Can it afford to fund historians who might alert us to the mistakes as well as the advances of prior “green revolutions”? Can it afford to hire faculty who might enable not only the transmission of biofuels to the pump but also the transfer of notions of justice and equity from the classroom to the conscience?

Sincerely,

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