

To: Chancellor Patrick Gallagher

From: Members of the University of Pittsburgh Community

Re: Open Letter in response to your call for "Making an Impact through Commercialization"

Dear Chancellor Gallagher:

We write in response to your recent communication to our faculty regarding the commercialization of research and the expansion of partnerships with area businesses. While we share your goal of making the results of our research accessible to the larger community, we write to stress the many diverse communities with which the university must engage and the myriad forms this engagement must take if we are to fully realize your stated goal of "improving lives and the society around us."

As you know, today's knowledge-driven economy has left growing numbers of people behind. In addition, it is becoming increasingly clear that the growth orientation of our economy is the major driver of global warming, which is the most urgent problem confronting society. These concerns are related; it is the worst-off members of our communities, local and global, who will also bear the brunt of climate change. In addressing these challenges, we need to work with an understanding of what you call the "economic ecosystem" as interdependent with society and the natural environment on which human survival depends.

We recognize the economic realities facing modern universities. Decades of cuts to public education have forced institutions of higher learning to find other sources of support for research and teaching. Partnerships with the private sector have been central to many university resourcing strategies and can, as you so clearly articulate, bring benefits to the university and to the communities we serve.

Yet the commodification of knowledge through intellectual property law can effectively exclude most of humanity from the benefits of our research. As we encourage engagement with the community, we need to transcend the narrow metric of dollars and cents and think in terms of the well-being of all members of our communities. The business sector can be an important partner in research and development, but there is also a crucial social need and ethical imperative to engage and partner with those who have suffered the most from growing inequalities in wealth, income, security, and education. For it is among people in these sectors that the solutions to the world's intersecting crises are emerging.

Commercialization has its place, but it also carries substantial risks. These include risks to the nature of the research that we conduct and to its integrity. Keeping knowledge free is in our own professional self-interest. The open and free exchange of research and data is essential to advancing scientific knowledge, and commodification threatens this fundamental principle of scientific inquiry. We need access to others' research in order to advance our own work and contribute to the collective pursuit of relevant knowledge.

In addition, universities are increasingly subject to pressure from their corporate “partners” to manipulate, suppress, or simply avoid research that counters the interests of those who fund it. Many scholars regard it as our obligation to ensure that the knowledge we help to generate is protected as a common resource and made widely and equally accessible to all people—especially the most underprivileged groups. Pitt has in some respects been a leader in this regard, as initiatives on open access publishing and accessible digital repositories of scholarship attest. We must be prudent in devising strategies for the production and dissemination of knowledge that maintain intellectual integrity, are inclusive rather than exclusive, and that create opportunity for and empower all members of our communities.

The university is one of the few places where our society might find leadership in developing the ideas and models we need to re-orient society in ways that can help to ensure that everyone today and in future generations can share in the benefits that so many of us at Pitt enjoy. We agree on the need to enhance our partnerships with the community, and we urge you to reiterate that our engagement must be with partners of all kinds —especially those working with and on behalf of people whose needs are greatest.

We also urge you to take steps to make Pitt a leader in the search for real solutions to the climate crisis. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has concluded that we need to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases to nearly zero by 2050 to avoid catastrophic disruption to human life on Earth. Our skills as innovators and entrepreneurs are needed to address the coming realities of unpredictable and unprecedented environmental disruption. We must do so in ways that also address the increasingly precarious social and economic situation of growing numbers of our citizens and of people around the world.

While technological innovation will certainly play a significant role in this search for solutions, we must have the courage to apply our skills and knowledge in the search for new models and new ways of thinking. This search must include a turn away from a narrowly-conceived “growth” agenda that has brought us to the brink of climate catastrophe while leaving more and more people behind. It must include developing, through engagement with our various community partners, models that theorize our economy as embedded within communities and for improving those communities and all of their members.

We are eager to work with you to devise strategies for knowledge production and dissemination that support higher education while increasing the capacities of everyone to access and benefit from that knowledge in building vibrant, sustainable, and inclusive communities. With you, we share the belief that all of these steps “are in support of our core mission – making the world better through knowledge.”

Signed...