

Wednesday, October 12, 2016

Dear Dr. Sedlak,

In the National Academies' text *On Being A Scientist: A Guide to Responsible Conduct in Research*, one of the main obligations of a scientist is "to act in ways that serve the public."

In his *On Laws*, Cicero states, "let the safety of the people be their highest law." This same credo is generally taken to be paramount to modern engineering.

Many people in the U.S. today seem to think of academic scientific research as an extremely expensive hobby conducted at public expense and that researchers spend far too much time on this hobby than on teaching students (who pay high tuition). The ES&T editorial cautioning against academic researchers becoming 'activists' because of potential negative ramifications for research/academic funding only helps to reinforce this concept of academic research as an expensive, hobby funded by taxpayers. It makes it seem like we care far more about research/academic funding than about serving society.

I live in Michigan and several years ago I had a very long talk with an employee of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality about challenges in the state. She said that the DEQ was way underfunded and understaffed and that the political climate was making it impossible for them to do their job of protecting the environment and public safety. She further said that it was important for academics to step up and speak out about environmental issues in the state.

How would any of us feel if we lived in Flint Michigan, our children were being poisoned, and an academic researcher failed to be brave enough to step up and do something about it because of fears about ramifications for research funding? This is a fundamental issue of social justice, especially considering that a poor community was and is at risk.

The researchers at VaTech have done exactly the right thing: morally, ethically, and professionally. They took brave action not to be Hollywood heroes but because it was their responsibility as engineers to society.

Being editor of ES&T is surely a huge amount of work and we all thank you for taking on this massive effort. But, I fear that your editorial crossed the line between academic researchers serving society versus serving ourselves. While I'm sure this was not your intent, I fear that it may do far more damage to academic funding than anything Marc Edwards et al. have done by reinforcing the stereotype of scientists being wrapped up in their research hobbies and careers first and their service to society a distant second. I wish you had gotten the full support of the scientific community before you phrased your editorial in these terms, especially given your editorial role.

Sincerely,



Patricia A. Maurice  
Professor emerita  
University of Notre Dame