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## INDUSTRY DATA QUALITY WARNING TO UNIVERSITIES DRAWS SHARP RESPONSE

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Date: August 22, 2003 -

A recent letter by the industry-funded Center for Regulatory Effectiveness (CRE) warning universities that their research must comply with federal data quality requirements if they want it to be considered by federal policymakers -- and that they may lose federal funds for failing to comply -- is prompting an outcry of protest from academic institutions.

Associations representing universities and academics are strongly defending the integrity of their research and claim that questions about academic researchers' conclusions are part of routine scientific debate, not an acknowledgment that university scientists produce flawed research or intentionally skew their results based on personal bias.

One university source calls the letter an attack on the First Amendment, while another says CRE appears to be trying to replace university research with industry-funded science.

The Aug. 6 letter was sent to dozens of leading research universities along with their national university associations. It references the Data Quality Act and federal agency data quality guidelines, in effect since last fall, which mandate that the government disseminate only the highest quality information.

“Many universities have policies on academic freedom and responsibility which apply to faculty. While some of these policies make clear that academic freedom must be coupled with the responsibility to uphold professional standards and communicate with intellectual honesty and accuracy, others speak only to academic freedom and not responsibility,” CRE's letter says. *The letter is available on [InsideEPA.com](http://InsideEPA.com).*

“Recently, we have become aware of several instances in which university faculty and/or personnel have submitted information . . . which clearly did not comply with the new data quality standards,” the letter continues. “Such non-compliance took the form of significant omissions, inaccuracies, and manifest biases. In some cases, this non-compliance was compounded by the issuance of university press releases emphasizing certain aspects of the flawed information.”

The letter recommends that universities advise faculty and administrative staff of the standards, consider revising their policies on academic freedom and integrity, and ensure that their policies make clear that the federal standards apply regardless of whether the university personnel “give the appearance of communicating in their university capacity or in an individual capacity.”

An industry source calls the letter “a reasonable request.”

A CRE source says the letter is meant to give universities a chance to be proactive about data quality requirements. “If they get on top now, it could save them a lot of problems in the future,” the source says. “If they don’t . . . we will be more direct in our concerns.”

The source says the next step would be to inform a federal agency that material a university submitted cannot be disseminated. “If the agency agrees, then the question is, why give money to universities if they can’t do anything with their research funds? If we really start to invoke this, millions of federal government research dollars couldn’t be used. . . We’ve been nice up to now. Rounds two and three, we’ll be more direct.”

The source suggests that congressional appropriators might come down hard on agencies that continue to fund research at universities whose data policies are inconsistent with federal law and unusable in policy debates.

But a source with a national university association predicts that CRE’s plan will not gain traction, and the source harshly questions the group’s presumptions. “The letter writer believes submissions by faculty are biased. But institutions and faculty have a well-developed sense of responsibility to be as objective as appropriate according to the standards of the field of research,” the source says.

Pointing to common heated debate among scientists about what constitutes proper conclusions and proper data, the source says, “Disagreements are the very stuff of the advice faculty and researchers offer. To go one step further and suggest the advice is bad and should be cut off from federal agencies or access to federal grants is in effect to place an unacceptable burden on the robust exchange of ideas.

“I have seen no evidence to suggest universities or faculty engages in a systematic effort to submit wholly reckless information or opinions or of any gross unethical conduct so that the government should reject the advice, and then look to cut off research funds,” the source continues. “Threats of punishment for expressing ideas places an extreme burden on the people willing to express themselves.”

The source predicts that universities will not formally respond to CRE, but says universities and their associations will likely discuss the letter.

**Source: Inside EPA via InsideEPA.com**  
**Date: August 22, 2003**  
**Issue: Vol. 24, No. 34**  
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