

## Kevin Folta's Florida colleague reflects on conflicts in biotech communication outreach

According to his critics in the anti-GMO movement, the chairman of the Horticultural Sciences Department at the University of Florida, Kevin Folta, is a shill for Monsanto. He can't be trusted.

While Dr. Folta does not consult for Monsanto nor does he receive any Monsanto funds for his laboratory, his outreach science communication workshops at other universities have been funded in part by Monsanto — as Dr. Folta has acknowledged. Folta himself has received no money for his science seminars; the money has been used to cover hard costs.

This partial funding, so some claim, has transformed Dr. Folta into a propaganda machine on behalf of transgenic plants. The irony of all this is that the message that Dr. Folta gives in these presentations is totally in line with what the vast majority of credible scientific organization say and what, in fact, the overwhelming credible, peer-reviewed science has concluded: eating GMO foods is no more risky than eating conventional foods.

The “talk-for-travel-money” scenario outlined above makes a testable hypothesis. If the funding is what motivates Dr. Folta to give public lectures, then without Monsanto funding, Dr. Folta would not give these presentations. It is that simple and it is easy to test. Was Dr. Folta talking publically about the science of transgenic plants before funding from Monsanto? The answer is yes. Hence, this does not fit the scenario outlined above. There is no cause and effect here — despite the demonization campaign underway on the web.  
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A caveat to this is asking whether Dr. Folta is materially rewarded for his activities by a separate mechanism. Dr. Folta is a Professor at the University of Florida so perhaps the University of Florida rewards him for these efforts?

As a professor at the University of Florida myself, I can speak to the rewards system at UF with some authority. (Full disclosure: Dr. Folta and I are in the same graduate program as well as the same department.) The university, like many large institutions, has three functions: teaching, research and service. For faculty in agriculture, service means extension.

Virtually all faculty members in agriculture at UF (termed the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, IFAS) have an appointment involving two of the three areas. Each faculty member is evaluated yearly for their accomplishment in the assigned areas. Major criteria used for research involve the number and quality of papers published; grant funds received, invited talks, graduate students in training and graduated, etc. Teaching evaluation involves feedback from a peer review committee as well as student ratings. Extension involves impact of activities on the various clientele groups, etc.

So how much weight does out reach carry in the review process? Very little. While outreach efforts are receiving more and more attention, as they should, it does not formally fit into any of the functions outlined above. It is akin to serving on a committee. You might get a pat on the back, but I can say categorically,

outreach and committee service will not get you tenure or promotion at the University of Florida. In a very real sense, time spent on outreach and public education takes away from time that could be spent on activities that lead to tangible, material rewards.

Dr. Folta has another burden. He accepted our plea for him to serve as chair of our department. On top of maintaining a first class research program and his high standard in the classroom, Kevin must answer to the vice president for IFAS as well as to the faculty of this department for how well the department is doing.

In effect, Professor Folta's outreach program takes time away from his research, his teaching, counseling students, his administrative duties and his lovely wife. It is a huge negative on his money-time ledger sheet. Other than a few frequent flyer miles, there is no material benefit for Dr. Folta. In fact it is just the opposite. Kevin does it because he thinks it is the right thing to do. The vast majority of credible plant scientists and organizations also think it is the right thing to do. To suggest that Dr. Folta would manipulate the content of his talks for any financial gain or travel money is simply disingenuous.

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