

Talking Biotech: The Kevin Folta—Biofortified controversy: When transparency and confidentiality conflict

University of Florida horticulturalist Kevin Folta, the co-host of this podcast with University of Kentucky's Paul Vincelli, is in a difficult predicament. Two scientists, Anastasia Bodnar and Karl Haro von Mogel, who run the website Biology Fortified, and fellow board member David Tribe, have accused professor Folta for doing outside work that they believe represented a conflict of interest with a project that he was participating in with them and for not disclosing to them that COI. They [posted this accusation](#) on their website on August 29.

The scientists found out about Folta's work by filing a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request with the University of Florida, a technique previously condemned by von Mogel and used as the weapon of choice by US Right to Know, which has targeted pro-biotechnology journalists and scientists. Folta was retained by a law firm as a special matters expert in a case involving Bayer, which recently purchased Monsanto, a frequent target of anti-GMO activists. Many agricultural experts do outside work with university approval. Folta says he is bound by confidentiality to not discuss the details of the work other than to say he was hired to analyze data in a private case.

Folta followed accepted university procedures before proceeding with this work. He filled out disclosure forms in which the university approved participation in this paid activity beyond his normal job description.

Biology Fortified's main contention was that Folta's lack of transparency damaged the credibility of a joint project that Folta had been working on for years with the Bodnar and von Mogel and damaged the credibility of Biology Fortified.

Folta responded to the post on his website [here](#) and [here](#).

The still bubbling controversy has triggered an important discussion. Scientists typically have non-disclosure agreements. Such agreements demand confidentiality. At the same time, we expect them to be completely transparent. Can we simultaneously honor confidentiality and transparency? Probably not. So how can scientists be trusted communicators in a space where collaborators don't want their information shared? This discussion between Drs. Paul Vincelli and Kevin Folta hopefully will seed a much needed conversation.

https://geneticliteracyproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/149_Paul_Kevin.mp3

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