Staying Grounded

Essay by Philip G. Peters Jr.,
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Photo by Rob Hill

MU SCHOLARS WILL THOUGHTFULLY AND INDEPENDENTLY EXAMINE THE IMPLICATIONS OF NEW DISCOVERIES. DISCUSSIONS SUCH AS THESE CAN HELP CITIZENS AND POLICYMAKERS MAKE UP THEIR OWN MINDS.

AROUND THE WORLD, BIOTECHNOLOGY is as controversial as it is miraculous. On one hand, it has the potential to unlock the secrets of life itself, to provide the cure for cancer, to clean up toxic wastes and to reduce malnutrition across the globe. On the other hand, critics warn that without better safeguards, biotechnology could cause an environmental crisis, poison our food and, through human genetic enhancement of the wealthy, serve as an instrument of grave social injustice.

What are we to do in the face of these vivid and conflicting predictions? As with any promising new technology, some applications surely will prove to be social blessings, but some will not. How are we to know which applications to welcome and which to avoid? Which safeguards must we insist upon, and which are unwarranted?

Scientists, legislators and the public need help sorting out these claims. To that end, MU is launching a new interdisciplinary program to examine the ethical, legal and socioeconomic issues raised by human and agricultural biotechnology. The creation of MU's Biotechnology and Society Program reflects our belief that recent advances in the life sciences must be accompanied by a thoughtful, independent and balanced examination of their social implications. It also reflects our belief that a genuinely interdisciplinary exploration of these issues will improve the understanding of both the scientists who shape the direction of the research and those who critique their work.

MU is uniquely positioned to undertake this inquiry. We are located in the middle of the Interstate 70 Biotech Corridor running between St. Louis, home of the Danforth Plant Science Center, and Kansas City, site of the Stowers Institute for Medical Research. Here at MU, scientists do state-of-the-art biotechnology research every day.

As a public institution, we have the obligation to choose our research agenda responsibly. Two years ago, a working group of faculty from across campus fashioned a plan to make MU a pre-eminent center for the study of the social implications of biotechnology, particularly agricultural biotechnology. The goal is to hire new faculty members in the fields of philosophy, economics, law, journalism and public policy. These new faculty will complement our existing faculty in those fields and in others, such as rural sociology, political science, molecular biology and biology, who are already teaching or writing about biotechnology.

Regrettably, the state's financial crisis has meant that most of the hiring of new faculty has had to be delayed. We hope the delay will be short, because the discoveries in the life sciences continue. Once our new colleagues are hired, we will have an unmatched capacity to teach and research the complex policy issues raised by biotechnology.

This past year, the law school offered one of the few classes in the country addressing the legal issues raised by human genetics. Topics included the patenting of human genes, cloning, stem cells, privacy, genetic discrimination and genetic engineering. This fall, the Biotechnology and Society Program is offering an innovative team-taught course that searches for the truth behind the rhetoric regarding genetically modified crops like Bt corn and Roundup Ready soybeans. The class, called the Social and Legal Implications of Genetically Modified Food, is being taught by faculty from law, philosophy, agricultural economics, biochemistry, rural sociology, journalism and political science. Topics include food safety, food labeling, environmental risk, the patenting of living organisms and globalization. MU faculty are writing textbooks for both of these courses, and we hope that in a few years schools around the country will be using our materials.

It is important to emphasize that the mission of this initiative is neither to promote biotechnology nor to condemn it. Instead, our assignment is to keep open minds, to search for the facts beneath the rhetoric and to identify the value choices that ultimately must be made. In that way, educated citizens and policymakers can make up their own minds.

Social scientists tell us that Americans place great confidence in the information that they receive from their universities. Our neighbors trust us to be honest and evenhanded. I cannot overstate how much we are honored by that confidence and humbled by the responsibility that it entails. Rest assured that we will work very, very hard to preserve it. ❋

About the author: Philip G. Peters Jr. specializes in the regulation of reproductive biotechnology on behalf of the children who would be born using it. His scholarship includes writing a book tentatively titled How Safe is Safe Enough: Obligations to the Children of Reproductive Technology, *and co-writing a* Genetics and the Law *textbook.*