

Brown President Christina H. Paxson sent the following message to the full Brown community on April 22, 2022, using the University's Today@Brown announcements platform.

Updates to business ethics policies and practices

President Christina H. Paxson

Friday, April 22, 2022

I'm writing to share the measures Brown will take after several months of campus discussion on whether the University should amend its business ethics practices to prevent association with individuals and organizations that promote science disinformation. This important discussion followed a recent report of the Advisory Committee on University Resources Management (ACURM), and I appreciate the input I have received from our community.

In the coming months, the University will undertake two specific actions:

(1.) Because science disinformation is contrary to our mission of advancing knowledge and understanding, Brown will update relevant policies and processes to reflect that, to the best extent practicable, the University will not conduct business with individuals and organizations that directly support the creation and dissemination of science disinformation, defined as knowingly spreading false information with the intent to deceive or mislead.

(2.) In order to increase trust and transparency within our community, Brown will enhance its processes for the acceptance of gifts and grants. This will take place in two stages:

- As an immediate step, I will establish a small gift and grant review committee, composed of senior administrators (Provost Richard M. Locke and Executive Vice President for Finance and Administration Sarah Latham), and two faculty members drawn from Brown's Research Advisory Board and ACURM. This committee will conduct due diligence reviews on an as-needed basis of gifts and grants (including research grants), using existing criteria as well as the new standard outlined above. This committee will serve in an advisory capacity to me and the Corporation of Brown University.
- I will also charge a working group composed of senior administrators, faculty and Corporation members with reviewing University processes related to gifts and grants and making recommendations for improvements, including the establishment of a permanent gift and grant review committee that we expect to establish next fall. The working group, which will begin its work in the summer of 2022, will be asked to make recommendations to ensure that: (a) accepted gifts and grants reflect Brown's mission and values (including the statement on science disinformation); (b) processes are designed to enhance trust and transparency within our community; (c) the University continues to vigorously protect academic freedom; (d) our processes do not politicize gift and grant acceptance or use business practices as an advocacy tool; and (e) the process for vetting gifts and grants is fair, efficient and timely.

CONTEXT

These actions come in response to recommendations developed by ACURM following a proposal submitted in November 2021 — and later amended in January 2022 — by Scholars at Brown for Climate Action (SBCA). ACURM worked over several months to develop a thoughtful report on the issues raised by SBCA. Ultimately, the committee recommended that Brown amend its Business Ethics Policy to indicate the University’s refusal to do business with organizations that knowingly undermine science or science-based policy, or support organizations that advance climate science disinformation. ACURM also recommended that Brown maintain its Gift Acceptance Policy, and support an effort to identify organizations and funders that seek to deny climate change or delay climate action with the intention of perpetuating or advancing climate science disinformation.

FINAL ACTIONS SHAPED BY COMMUNITY FEEDBACK

In March 2022, I wrote to the Brown community to solicit feedback on ACURM’s recommendations. Dozens of members of the Brown community submitted written feedback and/or contributed to discussions of the recommendations in campus forums. Respondents demonstrated a wide range of views, ranging from full support to concerns about possible impacts on academic freedom, the exclusive focus on climate science mis- and disinformation, and the practicalities of enforcing the recommendations.

It is important to note that Brown’s policies for accepting gifts and grants already uphold University values, protect academic freedom and have strong safeguards against undue donor or grantor influence. As recommended by ACURM, the University will maintain its existing Gift Acceptance Policy.

ACURM also recommended the creation of a “clearinghouse” for identifying organizations and funders that seek to deny or delay action on climate change. I am proud that Brown faculty from a range of academic units — including the Institute at Brown for Environment and Society, the School of Public Health and the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs — are conducting research on science disinformation and the best ways to counter it. This is important work. However, the proposed methods for the “clearinghouse” are not finely targeted enough to accurately identify organizations or individuals that advance science disinformation, and it would be inappropriate to use these methods for decision-making on gifts and grants.

The approach we pursue as a University should be based on and reflect Brown’s mission and values, protect academic freedom, promote transparency and accountability, and enable efficient and practical processes for managing gifts and grants. The new due diligence committee and the working group that will review University policies and processes related to gifts and grants will be charged with carrying out their functions with these goals in mind. In the coming months, we will share more information on the steps outlined above, including the formation of the new committee and the working group.

I want to thank ACURM for its careful research and the time and effort dedicated to the committee's work. The full report continues to be available on the Reports section of ACURM's website:

<https://acurm.brown.edu/reports#petitions-recommendations>

I am also grateful for the Brown faculty, staff and students who contributed their feedback to this important campus conversation. I appreciate the active engagement of so many members of our community as we continue to strengthen Brown's business ethics policies and practices.

Sincerely,

Christina H. Paxson
President