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Alexis Walker

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Governing Academic–Industry Genomic Partnerships for the Public Interest in a Corporatized Academy

Alexis Walker 

Columbia University

Kayte Spector-Bagdady's (2025) *The Genomic Data Market* calls for a new model of academic-industry partnership, based on university-imposed standards for data use in the public interest. The paper makes a compelling case for universities to move from ad hoc, PI-level negotiations toward institution-level governance of industry partnerships, using the “power of expertise” to set terms that serve public health and ensure diversity in genomic datasets. This framing is valuable in highlighting the need to reconsider the industry partnership model that now dominates university research—one that often privatizes profits from public funding in the name of producing medical and other products, rather than demanding more ambitious commitments to public interest goals (Blum and Ullman 2012; Babina et al. 2020). Yet achieving this vision requires designing responses within a university system that has itself been deeply corporatized, both in the US and abroad (Alibašić et al. 2024).

Spector-Bagdady's diagnosis, based on interview and survey research with academic scientists, is echoed in findings from the commercial genomics side (Walker 2022). Through policy mapping based on in-depth interviews and a multi-round Delphi survey with private-sector genomics professionals, I have found that academic–industry partnerships are indeed a key lever for advancing public interest science and strengthening governance beyond the level of individual researchers. My findings indicate that a substantial number of industry leaders themselves are encouraging clearer, system-wide data governance policies on issues such as data stewardship, diversity, and downstream use. Such policies would not only create a more predictable and stable operating environment for companies, but also provide visible standards they can point to in demonstrating their commitments.

While Spector-Bagdady rightly cautions against leaving industry to self-regulate, there is merit in

considering whether standards could be developed in partnership across academia and industry, rather than assuming that today's revenue-driven and market-entangled universities will be the primary engines of this work. Such collaboration should not be seen as a sole endpoint; it is important not to foreclose the possibility of more ambitious institutional change on the university side, even as altering universities' orientations will require significant shifts to prevailing models. But our current moment demands pursuing such long-term transformations in the name of equity and justice alongside efforts that can be implemented now—such as jointly developed standards for genomic data partnerships that advance the public interest.

Such standards could encompass shared commitments such as baseline requirements for data diversity (a pressing concern reported by industry stakeholders), clear governance for secondary data use, and operational practices like re-consent triggers when data use changes (Walker 2025). Starting with “low-hanging fruit” where academic and industry priorities already align could help build the infrastructure, relationships, and confidence needed for broader commitments over time. This collaborative approach is also more likely to gain traction than adversarial strategies—which may be a nonstarter in a university system already so deeply entangled with market incentives.

THE LEVERAGE PROBLEM IN A CORPORATIZED UNIVERSITY

The Genomic Data Market positions universities as core drivers of public interest—as a counterbalance to the commercial incentives of industry partners. But the corporatization of universities raises doubts about whether academic governance structures are themselves insulated enough from market pressures

to do this work. Corporatization here refers to universities positioning themselves clearly as market actors driven by business logics and techniques, evident in leadership increasingly drawn from business backgrounds, the prioritization of intellectual property and commercialization, and the proliferation of performance metrics and audit systems focused on productivity (Slaughter and Rhoades 2009). Without policy levers that address this broader political economy, even well-designed proposals risk being undercut by competing incentives to secure revenue, grow technology transfer, and retain industry ties. These levers—such as funding-linked requirements or certification systems—remain underexplored and warrant further study if standards are to be sustained in practice.

Spector-Bagdady also argues that academic expertise is a key leverage point for universities vis-à-vis industry partners. But many genomics companies employ numerous longtime academics and recent doctoral graduates, and are investing in internal training pipelines that could circumvent university-based graduate training (Adetiba and Walker 2025). If industry leaders come to believe they can fully develop the needed expertise in-house, universities' gatekeeping power may weaken; likewise for US-based universities if there is greater recourse to institutions abroad. Yet many industry actors are willing to collaborate on robust standards that go beyond basic compliance—suggesting that co-development, not one-way standard-setting, may be the most durable path forward. The challenge is to design governance that is both principled and politically feasible in the context of today's universities, which will require assessing which policy levers can work under these conditions. We know little about what kinds of internal policies, incentive structures, or coalition strategies can sustain public-interest commitments in universities that are themselves market actors.

BUILDING DURABLE GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

Joint standards may also create space for participation by rank-and-file academics, who are likely to be sidelined in university-only approaches dominated by leadership priorities (Ansell et al. 2020). Such collaboration could also allow academic actors to shape industry standards with effects extending well beyond academic partnerships. Spector-Bagdady uses the example of 23andMe's extensive genomic database, but the company's bankruptcy filing earlier this

year highlights precisely why establishing standards is so urgent. Even long-standing market leaders can face sudden reversals, leaving critical questions about data stewardship and user consent unresolved. Academic standards alone cannot address these risks once data resides in private platforms. Joint standards could establish clear expectations for such scenarios, including restrictions on data transfer, mandated re-consent, or secure migration to trusted repositories.

At the same time, consumer skepticism about how companies manage genetic data—of the sort Spector-Bagdady describes—is increasingly shaping industry behavior. This creates openings for market pressure to reinforce strong standards. Embedding operational practices such as transparent reporting of data access requests, common language for communicating risks, and clear protocols for downstream data governance can help ensure that partnerships remain accountable to the public interest, even in times of market instability (Walker 2025).

While some observers may fear that such collaboration would lead to weak standards, co-development could establish baseline requirements—such as minimum thresholds for dataset diversity and explicit policies for secondary data use—while also enabling more ambitious “higher-tier” commitments that could be recognized through a seal or certification program akin to LEED in architecture. Legal and policy scholarship has shown how voluntary “high-quality private regulatory standards” can be developed when supported by strong external partners and administrative assistance (Abbott and Snidal 2021).

DIVERSITY BEYOND DATASETS

Spector-Bagdady is right to stress that more diversity among researchers does not automatically produce better science or more equitable outcomes. This is a question of remaking institutional structures with new priorities—ensuring diversity not only of faces, but also of perspectives, agendas, and the power to act on them. Workforce diversity in leadership positions, when substantive and widespread, can shift how research questions are framed, which partnerships are pursued, and how benefits are distributed (Siemiatycki 2019)—and should extend beyond demographic representation to include leaders whose expertise lies outside business-oriented approaches, drawing from disciplines attuned not just to corporate-style metrics, but to the textures of experience and the social

contexts in which science, knowledge, and scholarship operate.

Jointly developed standards for genomic data partnerships could incorporate this structural vision of diversity, tying commitments to inclusive leadership and decision-making authority alongside dataset goals. Such standards can move beyond tokenism by specifying who holds power, not only who is present. Evidence from politics and corporate governance shows that such rules, when focused on roles with real authority, can lead to substantive changes in decision-making processes and organizational outcomes (Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly 2006).

FROM SHARED PRIORITIES TO BROADER COMMITMENTS

In light of the realities of the political economy in which academic-industry partnerships unfold today, collaborative standard-setting across these two arenas may offer a more promising path to public-interest science than pressing universities to impose standards adversarially. Critics may worry that such collaboration would undercut the pursuit of ambitious goals, yet both the corporatization of universities and the growing in-house expertise of genomics companies unfortunately stand in the way of *The Genomic Data Market's* proposed bargain. Starting from clear, known overlapping priorities—such as commitments to dataset diversity—is a promising entry point for extending standards development to areas such as re-consent and long-term data stewardship. Building from these shared priorities may be the most pragmatic way to realize Spector-Bagdady's vision, drawing on the resources of both academic and industry stakeholders to advance science in the public interest.

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ORCID

Alexis Walker  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8316-2571>

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