

EDITORIAL

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Textile Research at a Crossroad – The Crisis from Unidentified, Non-Paying Customers

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The Crisis Statement:

In this era of global trade, the manufacturing base has been relocating from one continent to another and tangled up the supply chains across the continents. Despite the chaotic instability, the need for innovative research, product development, manufacturing and management has amplified, leading textile research to an unprecedented level of crisis.

The sobering question is, “Who are to pay for research that benefits everyone globally?” Unfortunately, the answer is, “Not many!”

The problem is compounded when the research is likely to benefit mainly the manufacturing countries with fragile research infrastructure and doing serious research is not considered as important as satisfying the demanding retailers on daily basis. On the other hand, excess research capabilities are often found where there are no “paying” regional customers or where governments have no serious interests in altering the seemingly natural death process for research. The buyers of the products still demand higher quality and better service regardless of where the products are made or who distributes them. The retailers must understand that this need can only be satisfied through serious research efforts. Their daily struggles for untangling and realigning the continuously evolving supply chains are self-serving and contribute little to product or service qualities.

I recognize an alarming regression in the quality and quantity of research conducted on fiber sciences and textile/apparel products/processes in recent years, perhaps with some exceptions in nano-sciences, nonwoven technologies and technical textiles. Research focuses in consumer science and management have remained largely regional while the businesses have expanded globally collapsing the cultural and political barriers that have long existed. What is being done by market segment is useful, but only meets the bare minimum requirements for serving the local markets.

Where Do We Go from Here?:

We can continue to perform the isolated, stand-alone research practice in each country for only “the identified, paying customers.” For the sake of secrecy or propriety, we may continuously duplicate and reinvent the old wheel. Under these practices, many researchers are continuously forbidden to publish the research results owned by the fund providers, while others may only

publish when the results seem neither highly useful nor beneficial to competitors. Consequently, much of the great research work done in many esteemed institutions is unpublished as attested by the papers being published today in textile technology and management journals. Governments around the world fund textile research for self-serving interest of their own industries and economic gains but too often they find the net outcome disproportional to the size of funds and disappointing to the tax payers.

It is heartening to recognize that several countries have begun to require “international collaboration” as a precondition for major research funding, not as a goodwill gesture or cultural awakening. In fact, the wisdom gained from failures and disappointments seem to have propelled such a decision. The researchers, however, have little training in constructing bridges for an effective “International Research Collaboration.” Only with a new vision of research administrators in each institution can we create global research collaboration that benefits all. It is a responsibility too complex and too cumbersome for individual researchers to assume. Now is the time to create an efficient new model for international research collaboration that benefits all.

U.S. Senator Barbara Mikulsky from Maryland – an avid supporter of basic research in the U.S. - once said “Be a bit patriotic in proposing a basic research!” after the NSF research budget had been reduced during hard economic times. She simply relayed the sentiments of the politicians who would fund basic research only if it appears to benefit the U.S. while the research products may be used by others globally. Today, many important basic research projects in U.S. universities and government institutions are carried out jointly with other research organizations globally. This being the case, the true focal point should be how to manage the research funds for maximum benefits rather than who does the research and where.

My Wish List:

All governments should fund basic research and share the results; keep only the applied research and product development proprietary. Retailers should pay for the benefits they receive and should be more proactive in funding the needed research. Process research should be emphasized and must continue somewhere as no “new” product can be born without a new or improved process. Consumers should be studied not just to enhance sales but to create new and better products that meet the need of the consumers. Textile and apparel technology should not perish in the midst of relocations or with demise of manufacturing in developed countries. Science and technology need not and should not be reinvented with tax money, no matter who pays.

Journal of Textile and Apparel Technology and Management (JTATM) is still at its infancy. Nonetheless, our goal and vision are lofty! We would be more than gratified if the Journal can help bridge the fragmented, fragile research communities around the globe, and foster a healthy, sustained growth of a knowledge base in fiber science, textile/apparel technology and management of the evolving supply chains. The current crisis in the textile research environment is truly worthy of further discussions.

As an e-journal, we have yet to master the skills and expand our horizons. I thank you and ask for your patience and continuous support for the Journal. *(Views expressed in this editorial are personal and do not constitute an official position of the department, college or university.)*