

UC Berkeley, Don't Send Those Swabs

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U C Berkeley is proposing to launch an unprecedented, risky experiment on its incoming class. Under the plan, the university will send cotton swabs to thousands of 17- and 18-year-old freshmen and transfer students, and ask them to rub the inside of their cheeks. The returned swabs will be analyzed for three gene variants as part of the university's annual "On the Same Page" program, in which incoming students engage in a common conversation, typically by reading and discussing a book.

This plan is problematic for several reasons.

First, it's no exaggeration to call it an experiment; it is classified as such. The ethical cornerstone of human experimentation is free and informed consent, but UC Berkeley's endeavor is subtly coercive. These students, some of them minors, understandably place a great degree of trust in their university and should be able to count on it not to abuse this trust. Furthermore, most of them will want to be "on the same page" as their peers, creating social pressure to participate.

Second, the endeavor will have the effect of legitimizing, if not promoting, the controversial direct-to-consumer genetics testing industry. "DTC gene tests" have been widely criticized for misleading consumers, for producing inconsistent results and for what amounts to practicing medicine without a license. Several medical and scientific professional societies have come out strongly against them. A congressional committee just held hearings. The departments of health in New York and California have both intervened. In fact, the same day that UC Berkeley announced its plan, the Food and Drug Administration halted the first sale of such tests at Walgreens drugstores. If selling genetic tests directly to consumers is a problem in the eyes of federal and state regulators, how can the university justify pushing them on thousands of teenagers?

Third, the genes to be tested in UC Berkeley's program are not innocuous. One is related to the ability to metabolize alcohol. Excessive alcohol consumption is clearly a serious problem on university campuses. Will some students, most below the legal drinking age, interpret their supposedly superior alcohol metabolism as a green light to imbibe heavily?

Although engaging new students in controversies is wonderful, UC Berkeley's approach is the wrong way to do it. University administrators have promised talks by campus ethicists on the sometimes troubling nature of genetic information, and yet such discussion will occur only after the future students return their samples. Moreover, the sole announced speaker at the top-billed lecture in the fall is a genetics professor who has co-founded several biotechnology companies, including a genetic testing startup, and who is playing a lead role in planning and promoting the gene testing program. In contrast, campus experts in the ethics and social impacts of biotechnology were not consulted until after the program was announced.

At best, UC Berkeley put the cart before the horse. It should rethink the entire endeavor and should certainly not send the DNA sampling swabs this summer.

Jesse Reynolds is a policy analyst at the Berkeley-based Center for Genetics and Society, which advocates for the responsible development and use of human biotechnologies.