6. Smoke Screen

At a time of strained budgets, spiraling tuition, and funding cuts to education across the country, Virginia Commonwealth University entered into an agreement with the tobacco company, Philip Morris USA. The agreement bars professors from talking and writing about research funded by Phillip Morris, assigns intellectual property rights for that research to the company, and also requires administrators to report to the company any interest in the research by third parties. These terms violate University research policies, including the right of researchers to publish results and the right of the university to retain intellectual property rights.

Scholars across the country, including faculty from Virginia Commonwealth University, expressed shock at the university's agreement to relinquish control of publishing research results to a corporation with a vested interest in controlling information about its products. Critics charge that this agreement undermines both the scientific integrity and the fundamental value of the university as a place to examine ideas and research results freely and thoroughly. Many question the appropriateness of accepting money from tobacco companies because of the health risks and cost of smoking, and the tobacco industry's past misuse of scientific data.

A Virginia Commonwealth University spokesperson defended the agreement, saying that some of the funding will support research on pulmonary disease and reduction of environmental toxins from chemical processing. The spokesperson also defended the restrictions on disclosing information, citing Philip Morris USA's need for confidentiality to protect its commercial interests, and to ensure that research results are neither misinterpreted nor released prematurely.

In addition to the research funding, the university expects long-term benefits from an enhanced relationship with its Richmond-based neighbor: Philip Morris USA is the nation's largest tobacco company and leads the tobacco industry in funding academic research.