Last August, a federal court found the U.S. tobacco industry responsible for violating the RICO statute and perpetrating a massive fraud on the American public. Among the court’s findings: the tobacco industry is a racketeering enterprise and is subject to court-ordered sales and corporate divestiture.

The court found that the tobacco industry’s racketeering enterprise was continuing. It named the Philip Morris External Research Program, which funds current projects at the University of California, as part of that racketeering enterprise.

To make vivid how Big Tobacco co-opted world-class research institutions for its disinformation and legal defense strategies, the court cited the misuse of American Cancer Society data by a non-faculty researcher at UCLA, which got $525,000 from the tobacco industry.

The U.C. administration is dismissive of the federal court’s concerns, so U.C.’s Regents are now obliged to intervene and rescue the University’s reputation.

As other institutions around the world have found, the University of California scholars most familiar with tobacco industry operations have been briefing their colleagues on Big Tobacco’s efforts to manipulate and abuse the research process. Several years ago, U.C. faculty units began to develop their own policies to refuse tobacco industry money.

Since then, however, U.C.’s faculty senate and its administration have insisted that only the U.C. Regents decide if units of the University can refuse Big Tobacco.

Is there debate? Of course, this is academia. The U.C. administration opposes any limitations on grants, no matter the source. And some U.C. faculty believe that accepting tobacco industry grants is an exercise in academic freedom, no matter what purpose that grant-making serves—even though no one is proposing any limits on research topics, publications or speech.

But the variety of interests and opinions within U.C. should not distract anyone from the question at the core of the Regents’ deliberations:

**Why do the Regents of the University of California still cash checks from tobacco racketeers?**

Let there be light is the University’s official motto. But “Let there be light” has been the attitude toward money from the tobacco industry. Will U.C. Regents finally do the right thing and state legislature, and from private benefactors, who will see no benefit or prestige in supporting an institution with no standards.

Big Tobacco’s investment in UCLA bought it the chance to argue falsely, using UCLA’s name, that the science on secondhand smoke was inconclusive, to battle public health measures. Whatever the tobacco industry gains from the University, the University loses.

The tobacco industry’s checks are made payable to the “Regents of the University of California,” not individual researchers. The buck, literally, stops with the Regents.

What will the tobacco industry get for the $15.8 million it has invested in U.C. today? First is funding legitimate research topics, then legitimize grant-making bodies are also interested in funding them, with no trade-offs. (If only Big Tobacco is interested, what does that say about the project.)

Refusing future tobacco industry money will not stop research. But it will help to will the deeply corrosive doubt among public and press: If the University of California takes tobacco money, how else is the University compromising its mission? Refusing tobacco money is not a tough call, after all.

This decision is about something irreplaceable but all too easy to lose. The University of California has a leader in Academic Integrity. The Regents can safeguard that reputation and best serve the public interest by demonstrating genuine leadership and loyalty to the University’s mission. As the federal court made clear, Big Tobacco will not stop its assault on academic integrity. Only the Regents can do that.