

Objectivity and Conflicts of Interest

The University is committed to having its employees conduct themselves in accordance with the highest standards of integrity and ethics, and in compliance with applicable state and federal laws related to conflict of interest and objectivity in research. This information is taken from http://www.research.umn.edu/ethics/curriculum/conflict_interest.html.

Although the legal definition varies from state to state, conflict of interest basically involves any situation in which an individual exploits his or her position for personal or financial gain. This is probably the most important type of conflict because of its visibility and the potential for damage to the reputation of the University and all concerned.

Types of Conflicts of Interest

There are many areas in which a potential conflict of interest may arise. These include the following. (See Scientific Integrity by F. L. Macrina for a more detailed discussion.)

Financial conflict of interest: When a researcher has a significant financial interest in the outcome of the research.

Scientific conflict of interest: This type of conflict involves participation in review panels or other groups that make decisions regarding the allocation of resources or the publication of papers or someone who offers scientific testimony as an expert witness. Possible conflicts in review panels or refereeing are usually handled by excusing the person with the potential conflict. The situation with expert testimony is not so clear, but the individual's background and connections should be revealed before the testimony.

Conflict of commitment or effort: Non-University activities that require considerable time and effort could lead to a significant decrease in the time and effort devoted to the employer, the University. The University has a Policy on Outside Consulting, Service Activities, and Other Work that basically allows the equivalent of one day per week for outside consulting or other professional activities. The policy requires approval in advance for activities that demand more than one day per month (on average) and reporting of all activities in which more than three days per term are spent.

Conflict of conscience: Such a conflict can arise when an individual's personal convictions (e.g., religious, ethical, or moral) are so strong that they influence the decision being made. There are no widely accepted procedures for dealing with conflicts of this type.

Nepotism: In the past, the employment of two related individuals (e.g., a married couple) in the same department was not allowed by anti-nepotism rules. Now, the matter is handled by a rule that simply states such individuals cannot participate in any decisions affecting the other person.

Managing Potential Conflicts

Disclosure: This allows others to assess the work in light of the potential conflict of interest. Knowing this perhaps helps the researcher to be more objective.

Monitoring of research: Research being done for a commercial company or sponsoring agent could be monitored by an independent body to ensure that undue influence is not being exerted on the results.

Modification of research plan: The proposed research may have to be carried out in such a way so as to avoid conflict, bias, or undue influence.

Removing the conflict: This can include divestiture of financial interests, non-participation, or severance of relationships. In some cases, the only way to remove a conflict of interest is to divest oneself of one's financial interest in a company. Or abstaining from participating in either in the decisions or research programs may often be the simplest means to avoid a conflict. Alternatively, perhaps resignation from management positions or government boards that create actual or potential conflicts may be necessary to remove the conflict.

Objectivity in Statistical Analyses

How can we hope for objectivity in our statistical analyses?

Name: _____

Have you ever had a conflict of interest? Tell me a little about it. Alternatively, tell me something interesting or new you learned today. Thanks.

Case Studies

For your group's case study, identify and discuss the conflicts (real, potential, or perceived). What kind are they? Is disclosure required? What are some possible remedies? Be ready to summarize the case and your thoughts to the whole group.

Case No. 1: University Agribusiness Links

As recently reported in the Minneapolis Star Tribune, the Environmental Quality Board is planning to conduct a two-year environmental study of livestock operations (feedlots, in particular). The Board carries out its studies by hiring researchers to conduct various portions of the work. A citizen's advisory group has been meeting for more than a year to develop guidelines for the study and has identified 12 topics of concern related to the social, economic, environmental, and health effects of large-scale livestock production.

One of the participating groups, Clean Water Alliance of Minnesota, has resigned from the study's advisory group claiming that the study's conclusions would be predictably in favor of expanded livestock operations because it will be done by University of Minnesota researchers who have received hundreds of thousands of dollars from agribusiness interests, such as the Minnesota Pork Producers, the National Pork Council, and the Farm Bureau. Clean Water Alliance's perception is that the study would not seriously consider the legitimate concerns of citizens living near the feedlots because of the strong agribusiness connection of the researchers.

Case No. 2: Faculty Member's Business Interests

A faculty member has obtained an exclusive license from the University to market a complex software program to computer manufacturers and users that would enable them to perform certain large-scale operations much more efficiently. The faculty member has set up a small company to manufacture and sell this software, which was developed with University resources, as well as some external support in the form of computer hardware donated or loaned to the research group. He has assigned a research project to a graduate student in his research group that is clearly designed to enhance the performance and marketability of this software. He has not made any disclosure about his role in his company because he does not see any conflict.

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Case No. 3: Industry Sponsored Research

A drug company sponsored a major study of the side effects of a certain medication designed originally to relieve mild depression. The results indicated no significant side effects except in a very small fraction of the study population which experienced minor inconveniences such as headaches and occasional dizzy spells.

The study results were published in a reputable journal and given wide coverage by the press. The medication was given a seal of approval, backed by this study which was conducted by a prestigious researcher at an equally prestigious university. Sales of the medication increased dramatically, and company profits reached an all-time high.

The researcher neglected to indicate in the published article or elsewhere, however, that the study had been sponsored by the company that benefited so greatly from its favorable findings.

Case No. 4: Public Testimony

A university professor testified at an environmental impact hearing that the proposed construction of a chemical production facility will have no negative impact on the surrounding community even though the plant will be dealing with highly toxic materials, some of which are in gaseous form. The company claimed that the dangers to the community are very slight because of the safety measures they propose to take, and they quoted the results of a detailed engineering analysis carried out by the professor's graduate students.

The research had been originally supported by a grant from a federal agency, but when that expired, funding was provided by the company. At no time during the testimony, however, did the professor or the company reveal that the research had been supported financially by the company.