COI Philosophy

University of Pittsburgh | Conflict of Interest Office

Conflicts of interest, especially those of a financial nature, have the potential to threaten the integrity of a university's research, scholarship, instruction, evaluation, and administrative functions.

To ensure that its reputation and research programs are not compromised by even an appearance of inattention to this matter, the University of Pittsburgh has put in place policies, consistent with federal guidelines, that require the reporting and management of the potential conflicts of interest of its faculty, investigators, administrators, and staff.

Definition

A potential or actual conflict of interest (COI) arises when an individual's commitments and obligations to the University or to widely recognized professional norms are likely to be compromised by a person's other interests or commitments, particularly economic, especially if those interests or commitments are not disclosed.

Such commitments or obligations may constitute a real conflict of interest, a potential conflict of interest, or a perceived conflict of interest from the viewpoint of some external observer, or some combination of these three categories.

Possible intrusions on research integrity could occur if the outside interests of a researcher, financial or otherwise, affect the design, conduct, or reporting of professional activity.

Not all conflicting interests are unethical or impermissible. Ways can usually be found to manage or reduce a conflict to an acceptable level.

Disclosure and Confidentiality

Disclosure by University employees of financial, personal, or professional relationships that raise a potential COI or its perception is at the heart of the University of Pittsburgh's COI policies and is a prerequisite for determining whether a conflict, once recognized, can be managed or reduced or, in some cases, eliminated.

COI policies assure **confidentiality** in order to encourage full disclosure of potential conflicts without unduly intruding on the privacy of University personnel or their families.

Examples of COIs

- Giving remunerated **lectures** on behalf of companies whose economic interests are affected or perceived to be affected by an investigator's scholarly work
- A paid **consultancy** with a company that has an interest in the investigator's University work
- **Equity** holding in a company by an inventor who is evaluating technology licensed to that company
- **Holding an office** in a company whose interests would reasonably appear to be affected by the faculty member's research

Risks of Unmanaged COIs

There are risks if conflicts are not appropriately managed. For example:

- Protection of human subjects may be compromised
- Integrity of research may be at risk
- The public may lose trust in the University and its research
- The investigator/faculty member may lose the respect of the academic community
- There may be a negative impact on students' ability to pursue their research interests
- Research results may not be published, or may be excessively delayed
- The University may lose intellectual property
- Inferior or more costly goods and services may be purchased
- University resources may be improperly used

Historical Context

The passage of the Bayh-Dole Act by the U.S. Congress in 1980 allowed universities to hold patent rights for discoveries made at their institutions with the support of federal funds.

The acknowledged purpose of the Bayh-Dole Act was to encourage technology transfer from universities to the commercial sector to make the latest in scientific and technological discoveries available to the public through faster development of new products for the consumer or new clinical procedures for the prevention and treatment of disease.

As a result, academic researchers and their institutions have entered a variety of relationships with industry. These relationships have included licensing agreements with established companies with royalty provisions for the exploitation of university-owned patents, equity in such companies for the researcher and/or the University; consultancies for university-based researchers, and formation of new companies in which the University and/or its investigators may have a financial stake.

Along with the expected acceleration in the acquisition of patents held by universities, a new concern has come to the fore: that the enticements of financial reward from industry might bias the objectivity of academic researchers in the pursuit of their investigations.

Universities have developed policies and procedures for dealing with these associations between academe and industry, as well as with other types of relationships, such as consulting, to ensure themselves and their various clienteles that the advantages of these connections are not being achieved at the expense of the fundamental values of objectivity in research.

University of Pittsburgh

Office of Research Protections
Conflict of Interest

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