

Lea P. Stewart's Commentary on "Taking a Position of Influence"

Commentary On
Taking a Position of Influence

The job of a college faculty member in any discipline is a complex, involving multiple tasks and sometimes conflicting responsibilities. Most faculty members are expected to participate in three general activities: teaching, research, and service. This means that a faculty member must facilitate students' learning through activities such as classroom teaching, laboratory supervision, and student advising. A faculty member must also conduct a program of independent research that results in articles published in academic journals or, perhaps, books. In addition, a faculty member is expected to provide service to the educational institution by serving on various decision-making or policy-setting committees. In some schools, the balance of these activities may differ--some schools emphasize the primary importance of teaching while others require more research activity. Nevertheless, it is the faculty member's professional responsibility to the academic profession to carry out these duties.

Although this may not sound like a very complex situation, in reality performing effectively in these three areas may be a difficult juggling act. There are only so many hours in the day, and faculty members must allocate their time wisely to meet these three responsibilities. In addition, some faculty members are more talented in one area or in another. For example, some people are truly gifted teachers, others are innovative researchers, and others are highly effective participants in university service activities. Schools could not function without faculty members who contribute to these three important areas of academic life.

In this case, you find yourself in a situation that emphasizes the sometimes conflicting nature of the professional responsibilities you assumed when becoming a faculty member at Western Tech. You have been required to assume a heavy teaching load that has prevented you from conducting the research you would like. You see the summer faculty fellowship program as a welcome chance to pursue some research that you have neglected during the academic year. It is also clear

that you are valued for the service you have given to your institution since David Jackson, Vice-President for Research, has asked you to serve on the review panel for the faculty fellowship program. In this instance, your responsibility for faculty service conflicts with your desire to pursue a research project which was delayed due to your heavy teaching load.

How do you balance these competing demands on your time and potential conflict of interest? In this case, you agreed to serve on the faculty panel even though it will be considering your application for a summer fellowship. Vice-President Jackson has stipulated the guidelines for your participation, and you decide that you can serve under these conditions. Happily, the panel awards you a summer fellowship.

This case should lead you to think very seriously about your own definition of conflict of interest. You may feel that your participation on the committee was ethical because you received an invitation from Vice-President Jackson, and you followed the procedures he established for reviewing proposals. But does following someone else's procedures absolve you from ethical conflicts?

Obviously the time to have thought about all of these issues was when the Vice-President first invited you to join the committee. He asked you to "leave the room" when your proposal was being considered. Although you can physically leave the room, can you ever leave the room in the minds of the other committee members? Imagine judging the proposal submitted by the colleague sitting next to you at the table even though she has left the room. Does your impression of her as a committee member affect your judgment? Does the fact that she will soon reenter the room affect your decision? Do you feel that you can make an objective decision about someone else's proposal if he or she is on the committee? Could you expect other committee members to make an objective decision about your proposal?

Of course, you have to balance your sense of potential conflict of interest in this situation with your duty to serve on university committees when asked. You need to be a good university citizen without compromising your ethical standards. In this case, how might you have contributed to the summer faculty fellowship program without actually serving on the committee that considered your proposal?

There is an exercise called the "nine dot problem" in which you are given a picture of nine dots arranged in three rows of three dots. You are asked to connect all the dots with four straight lines without lifting your pen from the paper. Most people who

try to solve this puzzle draw an imaginary box around the dots and never think of going outside of this line. The problem is impossible to solve, however, without drawing lines that go beyond the boundaries of the nine dots. In the same way, when we are asked to do something we often think that our only options are to do what is asked or not to do it. But often there are more than two options in a situation. This case provides a clear example in which the initial choice became either serving on the committee or not serving on the committee. Alternative options might have been available if someone had explored them.

The balance between teaching, research, and service is a complex one. Faculty members face conflicts in these areas every day. In fact, this case reminds me a situation that occurred at my university. The chair of a department was appointed to a committee to review proposals for special grants for projects to improve teaching at the university. One of the proposals was from a faculty member in the chair's department. The chair felt it was inappropriate to review a proposal that would, in effect, bring money into his department so he did not rank this particular proposal. Others on the committee did not perceive a similar conflict of interest and ranked proposals from their departments highly. When the voting was concluded, the proposal from the chair's department did not get enough votes to be funded. Many of the other proposals did. What did the chair learn from this experience? One conclusion, of course, is to vote for his department's proposals. But the lesson that he learned was to make sure that the criteria for making a decision are agreed upon in advance by the people who are making a decision. If the committee had decided on criteria before voting, the chair could have expressed his concerns about conflict of interest and at least made sure that everyone was playing by the same set of rules.

Sometimes we play by rules that benefit us, and sometimes we don't. But remember, you must live by the rules you play by. Conflict of interest is a serious issue that is prohibited by the NSPE Code of Ethics for Engineers. Deciding what constitutes a conflict of interest, however, is often a complicated manner that requires an individual ethical judgment.