

Joseph Ellin's Commentary on "Taking a Position of Influence"

Commentary On
Taking a Position of Influence

I

You are a professor planning to apply for a research grant when you are asked to serve on the committee that will evaluate grant applications. What can you do? You will have a conflict of interest if you serve on the panel, so either you must refuse to serve or not submit your own proposal. If you're the only one who can serve (in which case your university and its plan to up-grade its research program, are both in big trouble), you might consider withdrawing your application. Otherwise, suggest someone else.

II

VP Jackson has a plan, but it won't work. You'll serve on the committee but won't evaluate your own proposal. But there is still a conflict of interest since the award is competitive. A person with a proposal might talk and vote against the competition in order to improve his own chances. Even if not, it might seem that way to those who lose.

III

You allow the VP to talk you into serving and you get a fellowship. The question is whether the losing professors should demand, and are entitled to, a review of the committee's decisions. I think they are and they should; the review process ought to be done again. However opening up the process from scratch would be unfair to all the other professors who were awarded grants. So the university is going to have to

find a way out of VP Jackson's mistake without taking away the awards from the other winners. This may wind up costing some money, since the fellowships are worth \$6000. Lack of ethics can be expensive.