

Michael Pritchard's Commentary on "Salary Offsets"

Commentary On Salary Offsets

Presumably the federal grant awarded to Carolyn specifies that a certain percentage of her time will be devoted to research. Without such assurances, the granting agency has no basis for making the award. The grant specifies a certain amount of money that can be used to support Carolyn's research time by buying out some of her teaching time. However, if Carolyn is not afforded time off from some of her teaching in order to do research, the terms of the grant are not being met.

Precisely how the department may expend the money it receives in compensation for relieving Carolyn from some of her teaching responsibilities typically is not specified by the terms of the grant. Hiring adjunct faculty or TAs to replace her in the classroom is certainly an acceptable practice. It is less clear whether using remaining money for student scholarships or staff administrators is permissible. The range of acceptable expenditures is limited, however. Making a down payment on a departmental sailboat, for example, is clearly out-of-bounds.

In any case, if it turns out that Carolyn does not receive a reduced teaching load in order to pursue the grant project, the terms of the grant are not being met. Not only Carolyn, but the federal agency as well are being shortchanged. This situation is big trouble for Wilhelm if it becomes known either to the federal agency or his institution's office of research and grants. Of course, in determining whether Carolyn has a reduced teaching load, it is important to know what a normal teaching load is for full professors. This standard may or may not be well defined in an academic institution. Even those institutions with faculty collective bargaining may not have a clear definition of what a "normal" teaching load is. Student advising, supervision of theses, university service, and any number of other activities are typically counted toward meeting a faculty member's required "full time equivalent." Also, how one's teaching load is determined is a function not only of the number of classes one teaches, but also class size, the number of TAs for the class, and the number of

credit hours of the class.

What is clear is that a simple averaging of the number of classes taught by faculty members in a given department is not a reliable way of determining the normal course load from which a grant "buy out" is to be subtracted. If, despite her research grant, Carolyn is teaching more courses than the number usually taught by full professors, she may well wonder whether she is getting the amount of released time from teaching to which she and the federal granting agency are entitled. Given the apparent discrepancies Carolyn has discovered in her survey of her departmental colleagues, Wilhelm had better have a good system of accounting ready to hand. If he does, to minimize further misunderstandings among his colleagues, it would be desirable for him to share this information with them. If he does not, there is trouble ahead. If there is a record of misuse of federal funds, there is both legal and ethical trouble. However, the situation also raises basic ethical issues regarding fair and equitable treatment of colleagues and the provision of ample opportunities for them to pursue their responsibilities as both researchers and teachers.