

Conflicts of Interest

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Case 3 Recap

A professor testified at an environmental impact hearing that the operation of a proposed chemical plant would **not** have a negative impact on the surrounding community. The professor testified on behalf of the research conducted by himself/herself and his/her graduate students. The original funding for the research was provided by a grant from a federal agency, but the grant expired midway through the research. The subsequent funding was provided by the company proposing the construction of the chemical plant. During the hearing, the professor made no mention that the research had been funded by this company.

Identify and discuss the conflicts (real, potential, or perceived)

We assumed that the professor is an ethical researcher (the study was unbiased) and that the university approved the professor's participation in the hearing. Under these assumptions this would be a perceived conflict of interest if it was discovered that it was the company that had, in fact, funded the research. The public and/or policymakers may believe that the reason for nondisclosure had to do with financial incentives for the professor.

Clarify the issues and how they relate to policy

The issue is that the professor is performing a public service activity testifying on behalf of a company without disclosing the source of the research funding. Even if the university approved the professor's participation in the hearing, he/she still needs to disclose the relationship with the funding company.

Develop possible remedies

The university should require the professor to send a full disclosure statement to the environmental unit.

Determine if disclosure is required

Yes, disclosure of the company's interest is required. The hearing and testimony involved reporting of research results and likely presenting facts and opinions before a public commission.

Ascertain the category in which the potential conflict falls

This is a scientific conflict of interest.

Determine the best and worst ways of dealing with the potential conflict

We felt that, in addition to the disclosure of funding, having an independent third party monitoring the research would be the best way to avoid potential conflict. We felt that doing nothing would be the worst way to deal with the potential conflict.