Approaches to Developing an Institutional Conflict of Interest Policy - Section Three

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SECTION THREE: The Charge to the Committee (What are we doing here?)

Because of the financial impact of a resulting policy, the university will want to carefully consider who appoints the committee. If it serves in an advisory capacity, the person who it’s advising should appoint the committee. Often a senior officer of the university makes these appointments to facilitate further review before recommendations are presented to the president. At other universities, it is customary for the president to appoint policy development committees with a senior officer serving as chair.

The committee’s charge can broadly describe the issues related to institutional financial conflicts of interest in the context of the commitment of the university to maintaining objectivity in research while developing meaningful extramural relationships. The charge may ask the committee to develop a set of principles for identifying and managing institutional financial relationships that have the potential for conflicts of interests without developing the actual policy itself. Other universities will want a committee to propose mechanisms to disclose, review and manage or eliminate institutional conflicts. The committee’s charge should be clear what type of outcome and advice the university seeks.

The charge should describe those areas for consideration by the committee. Some universities may want to focus on the financial relationships resulting from industry-sponsored research or the patenting and licensing of university-developed technologies. Others may want to include the financial relationships established through gifts or donations to the university while other universities will choose to create firewalls or administrative barriers that diminish the need for considering these relationships. Still other universities will decide whether individual financial relationships that may or may not have an institutional impact or role will be reviewed under the proposed institutional policy or under the institution’s individual COI policy. The breadth of the task assigned the committee usually reflects the areas and issues of greatest concern for the university. Narrowly defining the charge at the outset often enables the university to deal with the areas of greatest concern and use them to test new processes and procedures before expanding coverage of the policy to more individuals and units.

Whatever approach the university selects, the discussion in the charge should recognize the very real benefits of some of institutional financial relationships and the need to balance the perceptions of conflicts and potential for conflicts with the actual conflicts entailed in various financial relationships and interests.