

Ethical Dilemmas Facing Department Research Administrators

Case Studies

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Ethical Dilemma

*In Any Ethical
Situation The Thing
You Want Least To
Do Is Probably The
Right Action*

Jerry Pournelle

Ethical Dilemma Case Study

Scenario 1

PI Sonja Morgan has three sponsored projects: 2 NIH funds and one fixed price industry agreement. She asks you to charge 2% effort to the fixed price agreement (even though they are in the budget for 40% effort) and 49% to each of the NIH funds. You know Dr. Morgan has been working significantly on the scope of work from the fixed price agreement - MUCH more than 2%.

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Scenario 2

PI, Alex McCord, has recently gotten married to a man whose parents have major stake in a medical device company. She approaches a research administrator saying this company is donating \$10,000 to her laboratory to support her research and provides a letter from the company stating the gift is to specifically fund projects in her lab. She says she wants to hire her son (who attends the same university) for the summer with some of the grant funds to provide training to him and to have him help write reports for the company since he has volunteered before in the lab and is qualified.

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Scenario 3

PI Ramona Singer has 3 funds: NIH, NSF and a sundry. She has overspent her NSF fund. When you have your monthly meeting you bring this to the PI's attention. The PI tells you to transfer her salary, the exact amount that is overspent, to the NIH fund.

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Scenario 4

PI Bethenny Frankel comes to you and says:

“My grant is ending in June and I need to change everyone’s salary so that everything is paid by the end of the grant.”

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Scenario 5

PI, Josh Taekman, has several foundation grants and does little travel. He has been well-funded by NIH in the past but has not had federal funding in a few years though he submits a grant every cycle. One of his NIH applications is funded and, as soon as the grant number is issued, he tells the research administrator he wants to rebudget \$25,000.00 from supplies into foreign travel. Dr. Taekman is from another country where his family still lives. When asked for a justification for this request, he says it is to present data and research new experimental procedures for this new project in his home country. His wife works in his lab and, although she is not paid from this grant, he wishes for her travel to be paid on his federal grant and provides a similar justification about the benefit to the new project.

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Scenario 6

PI Luann de Lesseps comes to you and says:

“I need help with changing some salaries. I have this grant that will be over in September and I need to spend it before I lose it. I need you to put Jacques on 100% on this grant and then change him back in October.”

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Scenario 7

You receive a PO for approval to be charged to a PI Carole Radziwill's non-federal grant. The person who initiated the PO is not authorized to sign on behalf of the PI, however, you know this person has done so in the past.

Since you are new in this position, you ask your boss for advice. He says "since this isn't a federal award it doesn't matter since this policy applies only to federal awards – just approve it".

You can see that the policy very clearly states that it applies to all sponsored funds.

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Scenario 8

PI Dorinda Medley brings you a check for \$70K and tells you to deposit it into her account.

You find out that the check came from a company owned by PI's brother. You learn that PI makes stuff in her lab and gives it to her brother's company. The company sells it on the open market and sends PI a check for his cut.

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Scenario 9

The Department Chair has a spouse who works for a corporate sponsor. The sponsor has funded projects for many years prior to the spouse working there. However, since the spouse was employed at the sponsor, the department chair has become more involved in devising/approving budgets for research proposals to this sponsor. There is a faculty member who serves as PI but reports to the department chair and seems to have little say in the details of the study apart from the scientific portions. The research administrator, who works in this chair's department, must negotiate with the chair's spouse with regard to budget items and payment terms. Also, when the sponsor is not happy with the results for some reason and payment is delayed, the research administrator must work with the department chair to make a work plan for redo of experiments and respond to the spouse/sponsor queries and demands.

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Scenario 10

You are asked to increase the salary of a PI Jason Hoppy by \$18,000. You notice that he just received a new NIH award and funded 20% of his salary which equates to \$18,000. When you look through the PI's salary history you notice frequent increase and decreases in his salary.

Audience Scenarios