

Ted Lockhart's Commentary on "Taking a Position of Influence"

Commentary On
Taking a Position of Influence

I

If I accept an appointment to the panel, then it appears that I disqualify myself as an applicant for a fellowship. Obviously, I would not be allowed to, and should not, review my own application. However, assuming that not everyone who applies will receive a fellowship and thus there is competition for awards, even if I review only applications other than my own, it would serve my interests to give unfavorable evaluations to applications that are in competition with my own, particularly those that appear to be strong. Therefore, it appears that for me to serve on the review panel in any capacity would place me in a conflict of interest. Perhaps there can be situations in which conflicts of interest cannot be avoided or in which allowing oneself to have a conflict of interest is justified by other considerations. However, no such considerations are evident in this situation. Thus I must decide whether to accept appointment to the panel or to submit a proposal; I may not do both.

II

This arrangement does not solve the problem for the reasons stated above. There would still be a conflict of interest even if I left the room when my proposal was being discussed, since it would be in my interest to lower my evaluation of other proposals against which I knew that my proposal was competing. Furthermore, my membership on the panel might exert some influence on the other panel members even if I were not present when my proposal was being discussed. If so, this would further distort the reviewing process. There are no factors apparent in the situation that would annul the conflict of interest that would result if I both accepted an appointment to the review panel and submitted a proposal. If I accept the vice-president's argument that it is important that the "best people" serve on the panel

for the good of the university and I wish to do so, then I should choose not to submit a proposal. Even if I think that I could be objective about the proposals that I would review as a member of the panel, the conflict of interest would remain. That conflicts of interest should be avoided can perhaps be supported by rule utilitarian considerations--i.e. in the long run more good would result from the general avoidance of conflicts of interest than would result from the general practice of not avoiding them. The conflict of interest consideration seems to be the most important consideration in this case.