Conflicts of Interest: Sacrificing Objectivity Imperils Academic Freedom

Brett J. Holt
University of Vermont, USA

Abstract

This manuscript examined conflicts of interest in academia and their relationship to academic freedoms. Academic freedoms in this article were operationalized as the freedoms to engage in teaching/learning (lehrfreiheit/lernfreiheit), inquiry, external/internal speech, and service. After briefly discussing the purpose of academic freedoms, the author defines a conflict of interest as any situation or relationship that compromises the objectivity of the individual or the institution. Conflicts of interest can be "actual," "potential," and "perceived." All three of which affect the ability to remain objective in academia. Both tangible and intangible conflicts of interest are discussed by the author. The author, then, classifies conflicts of interest into four categories: 1) Individual Internal, 2) Individual External, 3) Institutional Internal, and 4) Institutional External. Each of the four classifications were provided documented examples that have occurred in academia. Within each categorical sub-section, the author discussed how that type of conflict of interest affects the academic freedoms of both faculty and students. The author determines that conflicts of interest are unavoidable and thereby safeguards need to be implemented to manage conflicts of interest. Finally, the manuscript concludes with recommendations for managing conflicts of interest.

1. Introduction

George [1] claims that academic institutions seek to preserve valid and reliable wisdom/data/knowledges through competence, expertise, and effectiveness. And, academia needs to protect "professional judgment" by those who engage in knowledge work [1]. Protecting professional judgment is accomplished by avoiding and/or mitigating "conflicts of interest." The purpose of this manuscript will be to explore conflicts of interest in academia and how it affects the academic freedoms of the student and the faculty. The author will begin the manuscript by providing a brief overview of academic freedom. Then, the author will operationalize "conflict of interest." A conflict of interest, the author will explain, can be real, perceived, or potential which all have negative consequences on the individual academic and the institution. After conflicts of interest have been operationalized and defined for the reader, the author will explore different types of conflicts of interest and the negative effect they have had on academic freedoms. For the purpose of this manuscript the author has classified conflicts of interest as institutional (occurring internally or externally) and individual (occurring internally or externally). The manuscript will conclude with recommendations from the author and a brief discussion. Finally, the author makes an appeal to the reader to preserve academic freedoms by managing conflicts of interest.

2. Academic Freedom

Dea [2] claims that Willem von Humboldt opened a Prussian university in the early 19th century that was committed to the tenets of lehrfreiheit (academic freedom of the teacher/professor) and lernfreiheit (academic freedom of the students). The university became popular, especially with foreigners who thought it unique that the university was not answerable to any government or religious organization. However, two world wars and two totalitarian governments caused a backlash against the university in the 20th century and many of those foreigners took the concepts of academic freedom to North America.

Current academic freedom can be broken down into the academic freedom of the faculty (lehrfreiheit) and the academic freedom of the student (lernfreiheit), according to Commanger [3]. Both lehrfreiheit and lernfreiheit will be used throughout this manuscript interchangeably to describe the faculty's and students' academic freedoms. The academic freedoms applied in this manuscript are derived from the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) [3] and will be operationalized by this author as:

i. the freedom to teach,

ii. the freedom to learn,

iii. the freedom of inquiry,

iv. the freedom of external/internal speech, and

v. the freedom to serve.

One of the six threats to academic freedoms reported by Holt [4] is “conflicts of interest.” Therefore, in the following sections, this author will isolate that threat and explore the effects that conflicts of interest have had on the academic freedoms of the faculty (lehrfreiheit) and the students (lernfreiheit).

3. Conflicts of Interest

A “conflict of interest” has been defined as a situation in which financial or other personal considerations have the potential to compromise or bias professional judgement and objectivity [5]. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [5] describes that while conflicts of interest apply to diverse behaviors and a wide-range of contexts, they all have one thing in common: a person or a group of people have sacrificed professional objectivity for personal or financial gain.

Browne [6] describes three types of conflict of interest:

i. Actual,

ii. Potential, and

iii. Perceived.

This author will list, operationalize, and provide an example of each type of conflict of interest in table 1.

Table 1. Three Types of Conflict of Interest

Type	Definition [6]	Example
Actual	Where one is being influenced by a conflicting interest.	An academic received research funds to study a product s/he has ownership in.
Potential	Where one could be influenced by a conflicting interest.	An academic applies for a research grant where one of the reviewers is a relative.
Perceived	Where one could appear to be influenced by a conflicting interest.	An academic’s spouse works in the same department.

An actual conflict of interest, according to Browne [6], occurs when professional neutrality has been compromised. Alternatively, a potential conflict of interest means that there is a relationship existing that could (in the future) influence the objectivity or neutrality of the academic. And, a perceived conflict of interest means that there is no conflict taking place but the outside community suggest that it is occurring, perhaps, because precautions were not taken to neutralize the possible conflict of interest. Because possible conflicts of interest can easily lead to the inappropriate decision making surrounding any given field, almost every profession recognizes and attempts to mitigate conflicts of interest [7]. Concurrently, since academic organizations are susceptible to conflicts of interest, Logue and Shrank [7] indicate that several academic organizations have adopted binding policies regarding conflicts of interest. Most of those policies make a distinction between tangible and intangible conflicts of interest. Therefore, this author will also articulate the distinction between tangible and intangible conflicts of interest.

3.1. Tangible Conflicts of Interest

A tangible conflict of interest in academia is, according to George [1], any connection that is financial in nature. This could include consulting fees, grant/funding opportunities, stock ownership in products being researched, etc. Tangible conflicts of interest could, therefore, include any relationship in which monies are exchanged for services provided by the academic or institution.

The tangible conflicts of interest tend to be recorded and documented, they are also the easiest to identify and manage [1]. Logue and Shrank [7] explain that while not all conflicts of interest are financial in nature; financial conflicts of interest appear to be the most likely to undermine public trust in academia. A tangible conflict of interest, thereby, results in questions regarding academic credibility.

While studying the financial influence of pharmaceutical companies on academic research, Belkman and Li [8] determined that over half of academic researchers reported a financial (tangible) relationship. Those tangible conflicts of interest included stock ownership, consulting fees, and/or funded grants. Concurrently, Belkman and Li [8] discovered that academics are suppressing negative results since it could hinder their ability to continue receiving funding from the companies; thus, creating a significant reporting and publication bias. In this context, tangible conflicts of interest have affected the academic freedoms of the researcher by coercing them to prioritize fiscal funding over reported data. Faculty’s freedoms of inquiry are at risk when monies influence the suppression or manipulation of data.

3.2. Intangible Conflicts of Interest

George [1] defines an intangible conflict of interest as any existing relationship that is non-financial but can be beneficial to one or both parties. For instance, both nepotism and cronyism are considered forms of intangible conflicts of interest. Intangible conflicts of interest in academia can occur when a journal editor is a family member of the submitting author or when a conference coordinator is a subordinate employee of the key-note presenter [7]. In both of these examples a personal relationship exist that could call into question the neutrality of the academic process.

While familial and other relationships can sometimes be detected, it is often more difficult to reveal intangible conflicts of interest that occur when religious and sociopolitical ideologies significantly bias professional work [4]. For example, an academic may be biased in their research methodology due to deeply held religious beliefs or biased in their teaching due to long-term political affiliations.

Since intangible conflicts of interest are more difficult to identify and less documented than tangible conflicts of interest, they are also more difficult to manage. George [1] claims that intangible conflicts of interest are just as corrupting to academic work as the tangible (financial) conflicts of interest. However, the intangible may be more challenging to identify and mitigate. Both tangible and intangible conflicts of interest are explored throughout this manuscript.

4. Academic Conflicts of Interest

Academic conflicts of interest are a form of intellectual bias [9]. Members of a scholarly academy have a responsibility to disseminate knowledge, maintain academic standards, offer professional criticism of current knowledge, analyze and synthesize current knowledge, and apply that knowledge to solve academic problems.

The Inside Higher Education Editorial Board [9] claims that academia needs to apply three components to their pursuits:

i. Integrity,

ii. Safety, and

iii. Objectivity [9].

Academic conflicts of interest occur, specifically, when objectivity is compromised in the pursuit of personal or financial gain. However, when objectivity is compromised, often safety and integrity are also at risk. Academic conflicts of interest can either be individual (relating to the sole academic) or institutional (which include the institution or institutional representatives). Further, this author notes that both individual and institutional academic conflicts of interest can occur internally or externally. Table 2 provides examples of each classification of academic conflicts of interest.

In the following sections, the researcher will explore conflicts of interest that occur at the individual level and conflicts of interest occurring at the institutional level.

Table 2. Academic Conflict of Interest Examples

Type	**Tangible**	**Intangible**
Individual, Internal	A faculty member requires a course textbook that they receive residuals from the sale.	A faculty on the curricular governing body (i.e., Senate) reviews a new course proposal from a family member.
Individual, External	A faculty member accepts private grant monies to study a product they have financial investment.	An academic faculty member submits a journal article to an editor that is a sibling.
Institutional, Internal	The college awards a merit raise to a faculty member who espouses a preferred sociopolitical ideology.	A college administrator appoints a hiring/search committee in which they are an applicant.
Institutional, External	The institution leases property from an alumni/donor.	The college awards a student scholarship to a child of a university official.

4.1. Individual Conflicts of Interest

Individual conflicts of interest occur when an individual has compromised their professional objectivity for tangible or intangible gains. For example, when a single academic applicant fails to disclose a family relationship to a search committee, then an individual conflict of interest has occurred. Individual conflicts of interest can occur internal to the school/college or external to the institution. The following subsections will discuss individual conflicts of interest both internally and externally.

4.1.1. Internal Individual Conflicts of Interest. An internal individual conflict of interest would be a sole conflict that occurs within the university/college. For example, a Dean that awards travel funds at a disproportional rate to a former classmate could be construed as an individual conflict of interest that is internal to the institution.

Commonly, throughout academic institutions, professors require the purchase of their textbook. Robbins [10] delves into the potential internal individual conflict of interest that occurs when a professor requires a textbook that they authored. While it upholds academic freedom to allow instructors to choose the “best” source materials for learning the content (lehrfreiheit), the instructor/author should forgo royalties, include a disclaimer, or offer an alternative text for that particular course to avoid conflicts of interest. Otherwise, the lernfreiheit of the student may be negatively affected because the professor’s objectivity in choosing “best” course materials was influenced through a financial gain. Robbins [10] suggest in order to neutralize the conflict of interest, the instructor could discount the textbook or refuse royalties from those required to purchase.

Handelsman [11] clarifies that while professors have the academic freedom to assign a textbook (or other course materials), the following ethical criteria should be considered to determine if it is truly a conflict of interest:

a) if the book (or materials) directly relates to the learning objectives of the course,

b) if the book purchase is mandated but not/rarely used,

c) if the book is objectively inferior to other textbooks,

d) if grades are dependent upon book purchase,

e) if the book is forced upon other faculty, or

f) if the cost is “exorbitant.”

If any of the afore mentioned criteria can be met, then it is likely the textbook poses an internal individual conflict of interest.

Specifically, in regards to classroom teaching, Logue and Shrank [7] identify a few internal individual conflicts of interest. First, Logue and Shrank [7] suggest that individuals who sacrifice academic preparation time to engage in ad-hoc objectives (objectives not related to the course content) such as learning computer software have engaged in a personal conflict of interest. In such a scenario, the faculty member may be affecting the lernfreiheit of the student since the student is not receiving adequate preparation time of the specified course objectives.

Likewise, Logue and Shrank [7] indicate internal individual conflicts of interest that happen when faculty members schedule courses at times that conflict with a majority of students’ schedules. Or, if professors offer courses not based on evidenced “need” or “academic enrichment” but rather because the professor has a personal desire to offer the course. Some courses have been reported as being offered so that the faculty member can utilize the class students as a “sample of convenience” for their own research. In addition, a conflict of interest exists if an individual academic advisor advises students to enroll in courses of other faculty on a quid-pro-quo agreement to boost enrollments but not necessarily engage the student in curricular enrichment [7].

Internal individual conflicts of interest quite often affect the lernfreiheit of the students by hindering students’ ability to freely engage in studies. Concurrently, internal individual conflicts of interest can affect the lehrfreiheit of the faculty by sacrificing academically rationale decision making for individual gain.

4.1.2. External Individual Conflicts of Interest. This author classifies external individual conflicts of interest as individual academics engaging in relationships external to the institution where professional objectivity has been compromised.

For instance, an individual researcher at Brown University, according to Heck [12], became controversial for a scholarly paper he published on a pharmaceutical drug called Paxil due to the possibility that it had been ghostwritten by employees of the pharmaceutical company (GlaxoSmithKline). Many researchers have called for the retraction of the paper because, according to a U.S. Senate investigation, the paper was indeed considered deceptive. However, thirteen years later, Heck [12] reports the paper has yet to be retracted and potentially fraudulent findings are still being cited.

Krimsky [13] describes an individual Harvard University child psychologist that accepted $1.6 million in consulting fees from drug companies and then promoted the use of those drugs. In this case, the individual’s objectivity was questioned through multiple investigations. Credibility of this individual researcher has been undermined due to a very profitable conflict of interest. And, to a greater extent, public trust has been diminished. Therefore, it is questioned if individual academics are “freely” allowed to pursue inquiry or are they beholden to external finances?

Krimsky [13], points to a growing trend of academic conflicts of interest that have occurred outside the institution. Reports of conflicts of interest have cast doubts on the journalistic integrity of many academic publications.

In a 2001 study of 181 journals and 60,000 articles, 95.5% of authors failed to disclose a conflict of interest [13]. Krimsky [13] further reports only 29% of journals outline a monetary criterion of how much external income should be reported. And, only 20% of the 181 academic journals in Krimsky’s [13] study had adopted any policy at all regarding conflicts of interest. Therefore, it stands to reason that external academic outlets such as journal editorial boards should outline policies/procedures that require full transparency of their authors in order to maintain integrity.

Similarly, Waldman [14] indicates that in California, medical professors are failing to report their outside income. When individuals fail to transparently disclose their external income, then the general public begins to doubt their findings. Amplifying the doubt, Armstrong and Waldman [15] claim that there were over 8,000 "significant" financial conflicts of interest worth $188 million for medical professors who did report their conflicts of interest to the National Institute of Health. How much, ponder the authors [15], went unreported to the oversight agencies?

In a similar investigation, Hergueta [16] relates that the University of California – San Diego's (UCSD) lack of monitoring allowed several faculty members to underreport their external income. One faculty member was even accused by UCSD of misusing a $10 million grant to enrich his private business and later was found "not guilty" on those accusations [16]. Therefore, the entire academic culture at UCSD, it could be suggested, reached a point of mistrust due to lack of communication and transparency.

A subtler negative effect on academic freedom is touched upon by Blackburn et al. [17]: If researchers are only receiving funding for certain studies, then academics are likely to only pursue those lines of inquiry. Deviation into other lines of inquiry are now considered "un-fundable [17]." And, this coerces the faculty member from "freely" researching their scholarly interest in order to receive financial gain elsewhere.

The researcher acknowledges that there is a severe amount of underreporting by individuals on their external conflicts of interest. It is unknown if that underreporting is accidental or intentional. Perhaps, individuals do not fully comprehend their own conflicts of interests. Regardless, it appears, from the examples provided, that faculty lehrfreiheit is at risk due to external individual conflicts of interest. Faculty are being coerced away from their commitment to free inquiry and engaging in more profitable endeavors at risk to their professional credibility.

4.2. Institutional Conflicts of Interest

Conflicts of interest are not just limited to the individual but also occur at the institutional level. An institutional conflict of interest is when the college/university's (or institutional representative/official) objectivity is compromised. Those processes include, but are not limited to: hiring process, oversight of human subject scholarship, curricular design, data reporting, institutional service committees, etc. This author notes that an institutional conflict of interest can occur both internally (between units/departments) and externally (between the college/university and outside entities) and will discuss internal institutional and external institutional conflicts of interest.

4.2.1. Internal Institutional Conflicts of Interest. Internal institutional conflicts of interest occur when objectivity is compromised between two internal entities such as departments or colleges within the institution.

Logue and Shrank [7] offer a few examples of internal institutional conflicts of interest at the departmental level. For instance, if departments deny transfer credit thereby increasing registration numbers in their courses, then a conflict of interest has occurred. Likewise, if departments offer a curricular program due to espoused ideologies rather than a discovered need, then the conflict of interest has affected the lernfreiheit of the students.

Several institutional internal conflicts of interest occur amongst internal committees. A conflict of interest can occur, according to Logue and Shrank [7], on internal decision-making committees such a human subject review boards, tenure/promotion committees, thesis/dissertation committees, and search committees if members (institutional representatives) sacrifice their objectivity for a gain. For example, Logue and Shrank [7] explain that search committee members will fail to disclose a relationship with a candidate. Or, a human subjects committee member might apply ideological criteria from his/her discipline to a faculty member seeking approval in a discipline that views such an ideology differently (i.e., psychology imposing beliefs on physiology). It has even been documented that dissertation committee members have failed to report "arms-length" distance of doctoral candidates thereby compromising objectivity [7]. Internal institutional decision-making committees, therefore, are susceptible to conflicts of interest and should be monitored and managed.

In a very specific example, a state senator in MN introduced a bill and secured over $1 million in state infrastructure bonds for Lake Superior College. And, less than two months later, that same state senator was hired as an administrator at Lake Superior College [18]. Because a job offer was extended and accepted while the state senator was still in office and sponsoring the bill, this was considered an internal conflict of interest that had tangible gains for the entire institution since the senator could be considered "employed" by the college.

Institutional internal conflicts of interest have had negative effects on both the lernfreiheit of the student and the lehrfreiheit of the faculty member. When objectivity and neutrality are compromised as documented within various internal units then faculty and students often find that their freedoms are suppressed.

4.2.2. External Institutional Conflicts of Interest. Jaschick [19] asserts that inter/national rankings as reported by companies like *U.S. News and World Report*, *Times Higher Education*, and *QS* are frequently engaging in conflicts of interest with the academic institutions. For example, 78% of Russian universities participating in the *QS* World University Rankings spent over $2 million utilizing *QS* consulting services. And, the Universities engaging *QS* consulting services increased in the world rankings by about 140 positions more than the Russian universities that did not elect QS services. Likewise, both *Times Higher Education* and *U.S. News and World Report* accept advertising monies from the institutions that they then review and assess [19]. The *Times Higher Education* rankings indicated an increase of approximately 15 positions annually per institution that invests advertising monies as opposed to those that do not invest advertising monies [19]. Thereby, colleges and universities are (or are perceived) to be purchasing their rankings.

Similarly, Warren [20] reports that Oil and Energy companies in the U.S. have underwritten over $800 million to engage in energy research at elite U.S. universities. The evaluation of those relationships between the institution and the private for-profit companies resulted in majority of the universities sacrificing their academic control/governance over the research body [20]. Further, only one out of the ten primary universities studied were awarded funding based upon expert peer review; thereby, conflating the boundaries between independent academic research and "research-for-hire [20]." Even more distressing, is that only 20% of universities, reported by Warren [20], were provided specific criteria for earning their grant awards.

More specifically, Lea [21] reports that one specific energy company (British Petroleum) engaged in a restrictive contract with the University of South Alabama studying the effects of a Gulf of Mexico disaster caused by the funding company. Lea [21] found that the contract included a three-year publication delay of findings, ambiguous oversight on data management, and secretive methodologies.

Similarly, Nestle [22] asserts that food and beverage companies have engaged universities in multiple conflicts of interest, although they often remain unrecognized. For example, major soft-drink companies provide training, teaching/curriculum materials, free samples, and newsletters to university colleges and professional academic organizations. Specifically, Coca-Cola funded grants through the American Academy of Family Physicians and the American Society of Nutrition. At the same time competitor PepsiCo established a Ph.D. training position at Yale University.

Likewise, Fahrenthold [23] reveals how a big agricultural company (Perdue Farms) was able to coerce the University of Maryland – Law School. The law school's environmental clinic students represented an organization suing Perdue Farms due to alleged pollution of the Pocomoke River and the Chesapeake Bay. The Maryland state legislature proposed taking away funds to the public university until it released data concerning its representations. One faculty member is paraphrased in Fahrentohold's [23] article as claiming that Perdue Farms pressured the state legislature to "threaten" the law school if they pursue cases that bother "people they like."

In another example, White [24] indicates that the University of Maryland president emailed the presidents at three other universities to promote a jewelry company (Pandora) who's Chief Executive Officer (CEO) was an alumnus and donor. And the University of Virginia president thought receiving such an email was "unusual" and notified the University of Maryland's Board of Trustees. The end result was that "ethics" training would become part of the University of Maryland's administrative in-service. This author notes while the University of Maryland president certainly had the freedom to promote independent products, it was done using university relationships, university emails servers, and signed the email, not as a private individual, but as a university official.

Miller and Belamy [25] indicate that Florida State University accepted a large grant from the Koch Foundation in order to establish programs in economics. However, the monies came with provisions that outright encroached on the academic freedoms of the university faculty. Most notably, hiring decisions for the five new faculty members were to be determined by the Koch Foundation. And, the Koch Foundation could remove their funding at any time. This completely removed the academic freedom of the faculty to interview and objectively select their colleagues and collaborators.

The examples offered in this manuscript evidence that external institutional conflicts of interest interrupt academically free processes by coercing institutions to sacrifice their academic freedoms for tangible or intangible advantages.

5. Discussion

Conflicts of interest are unavoidable. Even if we manage to avoid a conflict of interest there will always be the potential and/or perception of conflicts of interest. In fact, Lea [21] states:

"Receiving industry support in academic institutions is business as usual. And industry will always conduct business as usual by trying to control the research, manage the results, tie up the intellectual property, and have the university hold the industry harmless for any side effects that might occur as a result of protocols or materials provided by the companies."

In addition, not all conflicts of interest are "illegal" or "immoral." Nor, is collected data from research that had a conflict of interest invalid. Conflicts of interest are not always avoidable; Nor, are they always wrong. Brandt [26] even suggests that it may be an encroachment on academic freedoms to prevent or discourage academics or institutions from "freely" engaging in conflicts of interest if it helps advance their teaching and scholarship. Therefore, this author believes safeguarding against the negative effects of conflicts of interest, should be the goal to preserving academic freedoms.

Hergueta [16] provides suggestions for safeguarding the individual academic faculty from a conflict of interest: 1) Be attentive to academic fields that frequently engage in industry relationships such as oil/gas/energy, medicine/healthcare, etc. that could potentially draw unwanted attention to the faculty; 2) Request multiple disclosure agreements and cross-list with other public records requests; 3) Follow-up disclosure requests to faculty that have declared potential conflicts of interest and specifically look into any government funded research; 4) If faculty fail to report conflicts of interest, issue a legally binding public records request.

At the institutional level, Waldman [27] offers suggestions to safeguard against an institutional conflict of interest. Those safeguards include:

i. Explore royalties and funding that institutions receive by licensing technology,

ii. Investigate philanthropic gifts,

iii. Background check institutional officials that sit on external boards, receive honorariums, hold significant stock/equity, etc.,

iv. Closely examine institutions that report an unusually small or large number of conflicts, and

v. Examine the institution's policies regarding conflicts of interest.

If safeguards are in place, then conflicts of interest can be identified, managed, and reduced. Since, conflicts of interest are unavoidable, most colleges and universities have adopted policies or guidelines to help manage conflicts. Based on the evidence that conflicts of interest are unavoidable but manageable, this author offers final recommendations to managing conflicts of interest.

6. Author Recommendations

This author provides recommendations for managing conflicts of interest in academia. Recommendations for both institutional conflicts of interest and individual conflicts of interest have been provided in the following sub-sections.

6.1. Recommendations for the Individual

In order to maintain academic integrity, this author makes the following recommendations for managing individual conflicts of interest:

i. Individual academics should fully disclose any/all conflicts of interest. This full disclosure should occur in all publications, syllabi, presentation slides, and abstracts. This author notes that simply disclosing a conflict of interest (real, perceived, or potential) establishes a modicum of credibility to the work itself.

ii. Academics should adjust research, service, and teaching plans to avoid the perception of a conflict of interest. For example, a researcher could decide to study products of which they are not invested. Or, refrain from requiring their own textbook.

iii. Individual academics should terminate academic relationships that have created or have the potential to create conflicts.

iv. Academics should report current and past relationsh -ips that could be perceived as a conflict of interest. For example, an applicant might report that a search committee member was a former grade school classmate. Even if it has been twenty years since they have communicated, if not reported, there is a perception that a conflict of interest might have occurred. Likewise, academics have the right of recusal, and they should utilize if a conflict of interest cannot be avoided.

v. "Watchdog" groups or an independent ombudsman could be retained for college and university faculty. These people would be charged with oversight of study proposals, recruitment of subjects, consultants, data collections procedures, and reporting.

6.2. Recommendations for the Institution

In order to maintain integrity, this author is offering the following recommendations regarding institutional conflicts of interest:

i. Institutions need to encourage transparency. This would be done through disclosure agreements and contracts. This author notes that transparency should mean that the institution not only makes the disclosures "available," but proactively provides the disclosures to the interested public.

ii. Institutions should be limited in the amount of external involvement that they financially engage in. In other words, institutions need to place limitations upon the financial monies received from any one external entity. In this manner, no institution would be fully beholden to just one external entity.

iii. Institutions and contracts should be monitored by external "watchdog" groups.

iv. Academic institutions should create internal "firewalls" to prevent internal parties (departments and colleges) from engaging in a conflict of interest.

v. If internal conflicts of interest happen at the institutional level, colleges and universities should adopt a culture of mitigating through independent sources.

7. Conclusion

Academic freedoms, this author concludes, have been affected negatively by conflicts of interest that have either not been managed or managed poorly. A conflict of interest, rather real, potential, or perceived, can decrease the credibility of institutions and individual academics because they are viewed by the general population as sacrificing objectivity.

Warren [20] suggests that academia has become scholarship for hire and Blackburn et al. [17] pose the question if it is time to weigh what academia is gaining in opportunity, support, and influence for the common good against what it is losing in independence and credibility due to conflicts of interest? Further, the authors question if academic freedom can survive when credibility is diminished [17]?

The researcher concludes by acknowledging that conflicts of interest exist and are unavoidable within academia. However, conflicts of interest can be managed and limited. If not managed effectively, the credibility of the individual and the institution are questioned by the general population. This author notes that, while unavoidable, academia engages in conflicts of interest at risk to: a) Governance and b) Credibility. Regarding "governance," if we do not manage our conflicts of interest then we have failed in our duty, accountability and relationships with stakeholders. We will then give up the ability to self-govern since we have lost public trust. And, in regards to "credibility," this author recognizes the difficulty in restoring credibility once it has been lost. If we lose public trust, how will we be allowed to continue freely making decisions about our scholarship, teaching, and service?

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