Conflict of Interest Case Studies
Phil 7570, Spring 2007
Prof. Benham

Case 1: Ice Breaker
Describe a case of conflict of interest you have encountered (either involving yourself or others you know). What makes this a case of conflict of interest? How was it resolved or how should it have been resolved? Discuss how to identify and resolve potential conflicts of interest.

Case 2: Henrietta's Disappointment
(Contributed by Bryan Benham)
Henrietta Laplace is a new graduate student in the lab of Prof. Bigtime. A large part of her lab research is in support of Prof. Bigtime’s commercially funding research program. As it turns out her work is producing interesting results. Excited about the prospects she asks Prof. Bigtime if she might be able to publish these findings after doing some additional experimentation to make sure her results are accurate. Prof. Bigtime informs Henrietta that it is not impossible, but that the commercial funding source requires that they review any results before publication. If the results are as promising as they look, the commercial interest is likely to want to patent the results and/or restrict the publication as trade secrets. Henrietta is crestfallen.

Discussion Questions
1. Is this fair to Henrietta’s interest?
2. Is there a conflict of interest that could have been avoided?
3. What are the regulations governing this type of situation?

Case 3: Joel's Dilemma
(Contributed by Bryan Benham)
Joel is a graduate student supported by a competitive teaching assistantship (TA) in his program. He is taking a full course load during the school year, but is also teaching an introductory undergraduate course (with 30 students) and is expected to grade term papers for the large undergraduate 101 course. The teaching load is part of the requirement for the student’s TA, but he is finding it difficult to balance the teaching demands with his course work. As Joel sees it, either the teaching or his own course work is going to suffer. Joel feels that he owes it to his students to do a good job teaching and that bad student evaluations would jeopardize his TA for next year, but at the same time if he slacks off with in his own course work he will lag behind the other graduate students in the program.

Discussion Questions
1. How should/could Joel manage his conflicting obligations?
2. Are there additional conflicts of interest in this case?
3. Imagine he is offered the opportunity to work on a project with his advisor that would require additional time away from both his teaching and course work. How should he handle this scenario?
Case 4: Dr. Jenkins

Dr. Jenkins works with an evaluation team within a large nonprofit organization. At a staff meeting, one team member suggests watering down the negative aspects of an evaluation of a federally funded project because it was doing good work. The team member points out that in the competitive grant-funding world, any negative comment may lead to the funding being terminated. Dr. Jenkins feels caught between his responsibility to accurately report the findings and a responsibility to provide support for what he believes is a worthwhile project.

Discussion Questions:
1. Should Dr. Jenkins report the findings?
2. If he does not, is there anything ethically problematic about not reporting the findings?
3. Is there a way out of this dilemma for Dr. Jenkins?

Case 5: A Conflict?

Dr. Campbell is in the final stages of negotiations for an assistant professor’s position in chemistry at a small, prestigious college. Dr. Campbell wants very much to land the job, but he is one of three highly qualified finalists for the position. He is troubled about a potential conflict-of-interest issue. Dr. Campbell’s sister and brother-in-law are both students at the college he has applied to. As biology majors they will have to take at least one of the chemistry courses Dr. Campbell will be teaching should he get the position. Dr. Campbell knows the chemistry department is small (only four faculty), and he reasons that working around the problem of having relatives in one’s course might not be conveniently done. Dr. Capis, the departmental chair is heading the search committee. Dr. Campbell is afraid that if he discloses this potential conflict of interest to Dr. Capis, he will lessen his chances of getting the job.

Discussion Questions
1. Is this a conflict of interest? If so, what makes it a conflict of interest?
2. Should he disclose this information to Dr. Capis?
3. Are there other situations that might constitute a conflict of interest?