



UNIVERSITY *of* WASHINGTON
OFFICE FOR FACULTY ADVANCEMENT

Search Committees and Conflicts of Interest

Before faculty search committees begin the work of reviewing application files, they should have an open conversation about all aspects of the review process, including a discussion about **what might constitute a potential conflict of interest** and **how the committee will handle any conflicts** that arise.

Most of our fields and sub-fields are relatively small, so we expect to know many of our more senior applicants through their published work or through their involvement in conferences and professional organizations. We also expect to know many of our more junior applicants through our associations with their advisers and graduate programs. **These types of relationships do not constitute conflicts of interest.** Moreover, team teaching or co-leading workshops with applicants, presenting on panels with them, or appearing in the same issues of journals or in the same edited volumes also do not usually constitute conflicts of interest.

We typically define conflicts of interest as occurring when the search committee member will in some way benefit from the applicant's success, either materially or in terms of status or prestige. The most obvious cases of conflicts of interest, therefore, include **having a close personal relationship with an applicant** (i.e., spouse or partner, sibling, parent or child); **having been a co-author or co-editor with an applicant**, especially on a major project like a co-authored book or peer-reviewed journal article, a co-edited collection or special issue of a journal, or a co-developed database or other major digital resource; **or having served as a co-PI on a major grant.**

Another obvious example of a conflict of interest includes **having served as an applicant's dissertation adviser.** Having served on an applicant's exam committee or dissertation committee, however, is usually not seen as a conflict of interest, since it is usually only the adviser of record who in some way benefits from the applicant's success. That said, as a courtesy, other committee members will likely appreciate being informed about these kinds of relationships with particular applicants.

The best practice in these cases is simple: **When in doubt, disclose up front.**

Committees will need to decide how to handle **actual cases of conflict of interest** should they arise. For instance, will the committee member be required to **recuse** herself from evaluating a particular applicant, or will she be required to explicitly **frame her review comments** in terms of the potential conflict? As an example, a committee member might say something like: "Although I co-authored a short article with this applicant 10 years ago, we do not have any ongoing projects together, and I feel confident I can assess his more recent work objectively . . ."

Perhaps the most important aspects of this issue are **making sure all applicants are treated the same way by all committee members**—including external applicants who are already well-

known to committee members personally or by reputation, as well as any internal candidates—and **making sure that committee members consistently maintain confidentiality.**

When they have access to additional sources of information about a particular applicant, committee members may be tempted to base their evaluation on prior personal knowledge, gossip, or hearsay, rather than on a thorough review of the submitted application materials. For well-known internal candidates, committee members may be tempted to simply skip parts of the review and evaluation process altogether. As much as possible, however, **all applicants should be assessed based on the same kinds of evidence and using the same processes and criteria.** Finally, committee members may be tempted to share confidential information about the hiring process with applicants or the advisers of applicants whom they know well. Any sharing of information outside official communications from the search committee or from unit leadership constitutes a breach of confidentiality.

Here, too, the best practice in these cases is simple: **Always err on the side of being scrupulously fair and equitable.** When in doubt, consult with the search committee or department chair, college or school leadership, or the Associate Vice Provost for Faculty Advancement.