

UMCES Policies

II-3.10-UMCES Procedures on Conflict of Interest and Conflict of Commitment

I. Purpose

These procedures implement the Board of Regents (BOR) Policy on Professional Commitment of Faculty (II-3.10), the Board of Regents Policy on Conflicts of Interest in Research or Development (III-11.1); and University of Maryland Center for Environmental Policy on Conflict of Interest and Conflict of Commitment (II-3.10 UMCES). These procedures outline the mechanisms by which UMCES will manage the process of identifying, assessing, and responding to potential conflicts of interest or commitment, consistent with State Ethics Law and University policies. They are intended to guide officers, faculty, staff, and other employees at UMCES in reviewing and managing the disclosure and resolution of conflicts of interest and commitment—real, apparent, or potential.

Neither these procedures, nor the law and Board of Regents' policies under which they have been adopted, exempt any UMCES official or employee from any provision of State Ethics Law, except as specifically provided. Approvals granted under these procedures do not affect the application of other University and BOR policies or the obligation to adhere to other provisions of State Ethics Law

II. Definitions

A. Unit Head

The role of the unit head is pivotal in these procedures. For the purposes of this document, the unit head is normally the Laboratory Director, Sea Grant Director, or a similar official in a non-academic unit, unless a different individual is designated by proper authority.

B. Relationship

Restrictions on activities sometimes revolve around relationships of a faculty or staff member with other individuals or entities. As used herein, the term "relationship" includes any interest, activity, service, employment, gift, or other benefit or relationship with an entity not part of State government that would be prohibited by State Ethics Law if not disclosed and approved pursuant to UMCES and Board of Regents policy and these procedures. An interest or relationship of the spouse or other relative (e.g., parent, child, or sibling) of an officer or employee is included if it would create restrictions on the officer or employee under the conflict of interest provisions of the Ethics Law.

C. Research or Development

Activities associated with research or development may receive preferential treatment. As used herein, the term "research or development" means basic or applied research or development, and includes the development or marketing of UMCES-owned technology, the acquisition of services of an official or employee by an entity for research and development purposes, or participation in State economic development programs.

III. Reporting Procedures

Faculty, staff, and other employees are required to report outside activities and potential conflicts of interest or commitment through two means, as expressed in the UMCES Conflict of Interest and Conflict of Commitment Policy.

First, they must provide to their unit heads (see Definition above) timely disclosure of any significant commitment to professional activities to be undertaken outside UMCES, or situations where conflict or the perception of conflict may occur. This disclosure should be made before any such commitment is finalized. This mechanism provides a timely opportunity to protect both UMCES and the individual from adverse consequences that conflicts of interest or commitment can produce. Guidelines for what constitutes a "significant" commitment will be established collectively by the unit heads, in consultation with the unit's faculty and with the approval of the UMCES President.

Second, faculty must complete an Annual Report on Outside Professional Activities, which provides appropriate context in which the unit head can evaluate individual conflict issues, and from which the UMCES can gauge broader trends.

In many cases, no further action is required of the individual. The following sections describe how any concerns will be resolved; the procedures are different for conflicts of interest as opposed to conflicts of commitment.

IV. Resolving Conflicts of Commitment

In cases of potential conflicts of commitment, questions will normally be resolved at the level of the unit head, who is best prepared to judge whether the individual's commitment to institutional responsibilities is in jeopardy. If resolution cannot be made at this level, the matter should be addressed at the next higher level of supervision.

V. Resolving Conflicts of Interest in Research or Development

A. Activities Related to Research or Development

In recognition of the UMCES role in promoting economic and development in the State, the UMCES has been given the authority (under State law and BOR policy) to consider and waive certain State Ethics Law conflict of interest constraints in connection with research or development activities.

Thus, certain relationships (defined above) that would otherwise violate conflict of interest provisions of State Ethics Law (and/or UMCES or federal policies) may be permitted under certain circumstances. First, they must involve entities engaged in, or having an interest in the outcome of, research or development (defined above). Second, they must have been reported, reviewed, and approved in accordance with the following procedures.

Research proposals usually may be submitted to sponsors before a conflict of interest is resolved, but an award may not be established and/or expenses incurred until and unless the conflict is resolved. The resolution may invoke other actions or reporting requirements.

These procedures do not apply to relationships of the President or a Vice-President (or similar official designated by the Board of Regents). Such relationships must be approved by the Board of Regents in accordance with its Policy on Conflicts of Interest in Research or Development.

B. Initial Determination by Unit Head

Based upon the disclosure to the unit head (defined above) of an employee's intended outside professional activity or situation, and in view of the employee's existing relation to such activities, if any, the unit head typically will determine whether there are any concerns about possible conflict of interest.

If neither the unit head nor the individual are able identify even an appearance of or potential conflict of interest, no further action will typically need be taken with regard to disclosure under these procedures.

C. Conflict of Interest Form

If either the unit head or the employee expresses a concern that the activity or relationship may involve a possible conflict of interest, the faculty or staff member must complete a Conflict of Interest (COI) Form. The form is [available on line](#). The completed COI Form provides information on the nature of the activity or relationship. Upon completion, the COI Form is submitted to the unit head who forwards it for evaluation, through UMCES COI Administrator (Director of the Office of Research Administration & Advancement (ORAA), to the Committee on Conflict of Interest ("COI Committee"), a group composed of UMCES faculty and administrators.

It should be noted that submission of a COI Form may be requested by, or be advisable for the best interests of, the faculty, staff, or other employee concerned, as well as the UMCES. In an era of increasing levels of outside professional activity and interaction with industry of productive research universities, situations can be complex with regard to possible conflicts. In some cases, review of a COI Form may serve to guide and protect the individual faculty, staff, or other employees in pursuing outside interactions and relationships.

Once an activity or relationship has been approved, a follow-up report must be submitted in a timely manner whenever circumstances concerning the activity or relationship change significantly, including a final report when the activity or relationship ends. UMCES will request annual confirmation of any activity or relationship that remains in place from year to year.

D. Review of Conflict of Interest Form

1. General Background

After the COI Form is submitted, the COI review and evaluation process may include further involvement of the faculty or staff member whose activities are being assessed, either by that person's providing further information or by his or her assistance in exploring avenues to manage a conflict if one is found to exist.

The COI evaluation process culminates in a written decision of approval or disapproval from the UMCES President, upon recommendation from the COI Committee, to the faculty or staff member. Copies of approvals and supporting documentation are forwarded to the Chancellor and the State Ethics Commission.

Because disclosure of a significant new outside professional activity or relationship is expected to be made before commencing the activity, it is important that the unit head (and, if needed, the COI Committee) provide timely feedback and action so as not excessively to delay action by the individual in pursuing the new activity. It is also important that the faculty or staff member make disclosure in a timely fashion so as to allow sufficient time for consideration by the unit head and, if needed, the COI Committee.

2. Initial Review by Unit Heads

Unit heads are responsible for conducting the initial review of the COI Forms submitted by those within their unit. As part of that initial review, a unit head should attach to a COI Form a "proposed management plan," including any mechanisms that the unit head considers to be appropriate for managing, reducing, or eliminating real or potential conflicts of interest.

The unit head shall forward the COI Form, including proposed management plan, to the COI Administrator. The COI Administrator is the Director of ORAA.

3. Review by COI Committee

The COI Administrator shall forward the COI Form for consideration by the COI Committee. The COI Committee shall have five voting members: three faculty members, who shall be those serving on the Executive Committee of the Faculty Senate, one of whom shall be appointed by the President to Chair the COI Committee; the Vice President for Administration and the Director of ORAA.

The COI Committee may require that further information be provided and is encouraged to seek information, advice and input from appropriate UMCES personnel, including unit heads, counsel in the Attorney General for Education office, and the faculty, staff, or other employees involved. The COI Committee may also consult, as appropriate, with the Maryland Department of Business and Economic Development and with federal agencies that have imposed regulatory requirements on federally funded research.

4. Recommendation by the COI Committee

The COI Committee shall review the COI Form and recommend to the President whether the disclosed relationship should be approved. The COI Committee may not recommend approval of any relationship that would:

- a. give improper advantage to the entity with whom the employee has a relationship;
- b. lead to misuse of institution students or employees for the benefit of such entities;
- c. otherwise interfere with the duties and responsibilities of the official, faculty member, or other employee maintaining a relationship;
- d. be so influential as to impair impartiality in conducting research, interpreting research results, or determining research or other professional and employment priorities;
- e. present an unacceptable conflict of interest; or
- f. otherwise constitute a harmful interest or violate state or federal policies, or procedures, or the best interests of UMCES.

A recommendation for approval indicates the COI Committee's conclusion that any conflict or potential conflict is manageable, in accordance with these procedures and any approved management plan. A recommendation against approval signifies the COI Committee's conclusion that a conflict of interest exists that cannot be properly managed, and that the individual should refrain from participating in the activity or relationship.

The COI Committee's recommendations shall be forwarded, through the COI Administrator to the President.

5. Final action by the President

The President shall review the recommendations of the COI Committee and make a written determination. Approval may be subject to such conditions or restrictions as the President requires. The President's determination is final.

Notice of the President's decision will be provided in writing to the faculty or staff member(s), unit heads or officials involved. Among other things, any notice of approval should inform faculty, staff, or other employees of their continuing obligations to:

- a. ensure that their activities, statements, evaluations, recommendations, and judgments do not improperly give advantage to an outside entity;
- b. ensure that unauthorized statistics, documents, reports, comparison information, and other data are not disclosed that would improperly give advantage to an outside entity;
- c. be aware that legal restrictions regarding misusing their position for personal gain or gain of another, soliciting or accepting improper gifts, and representing a party before the Board of Regents or the Board of Public Works, or other State or local agency for a contingent fee, continue to apply notwithstanding any approval under these procedures;
- d. continue to adhere to other UMCES policies and procedures, including those concerning conflicts of commitment and professional commitment of faculty.

Approval may be withdrawn if it is determined that an official, faculty member, or other employee misrepresented the nature of his or her interest in an entity, or if circumstances change in such a way as to create an unacceptable conflict of interest or a violation of UMCES policy or applicable legal requirements.

E. Effect of Non-Compliance on Sponsored Projects

Non-compliance with the conflict of interest policy or these procedures may result in the suspension or termination of a sponsored project. Non-compliance could also result in restrictions on faculty, staff, or other employees with respect to future proposal submissions as well as other sanctions in accordance with UMCES policies, State Ethics Law, or other applicable State or federal laws and regulations.

If the failure of a research investigator to comply with conflict of interest policies or procedures has biased the design, conduct, or reporting of Public Health Service (PHS) funded research, UMCES must promptly notify the PHS Awarding Component of the corrective action taken or to be taken. The PHS Awarding Component will consider the situation and may take, or refer the matter to PHS for, further action, which may include directions to UMCES on how to maintain appropriate objectivity in the funded project.

F. External Reporting Procedures and Record Retention

The COI Administrator shall submit reports of all approvals granted under these procedures involving State Ethics Law to the Chancellor of the University System of Maryland. The COI Administrator shall assist the University System, as requested, in providing supplemental information or developing additional reports or analyses needed for compliance with the reporting requirements of State Ethics Law.

Upon completion of the process, copies of all COI Forms submitted in connection with research and development relationships that are approved shall be filed with the State Ethics Commission. UMCES, through the COI Administrator, will develop and maintain a file, available for public review that will contain all approved relationships with applicable COI Forms.

ORAA is responsible for providing the appropriate written notice to the awarding agency in those cases involving sponsored projects. As required by agency regulations, information regarding all conflicts of interest identified by UMCES will be made available to NSF or HHS

upon request. Conflicts that cannot be satisfactorily resolved must be disclosed to NSF and PHS. In the case of PHS awards, notice must be given for all conflict of interest.

ORAA will maintain records of all financial disclosures and of all actions taken to resolve actual or potential conflicts of interest at least three (3) years after termination or completion of the sponsored project or after resolution of any government action involving those records, or as required by applicable state and federal regulations whichever is longer.

VI. Resolving Conflicts of Interest Not Involving Research or Development

When a conflict of interest not involving research or development arises in the context of State Ethics Law, the State Ethics Commission should be consulted. The State Ethics Commission has the sole authority to interpret State Ethics Law. At the request of the unit head or State Ethics Commission, consulting work or other activities may be suspended pending an opinion from the Ethics Commission. Faculty, staff, or other employees or a unit head may seek guidance about consulting with the Ethics Commission from UMCES assigned Assistant Attorney General for Education and should come through the COI Administrator for that contact.

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