**RYERSON UNIVERSITY**

**Research Ethics Board Guideline**

**Conflict of Interest**

**Purpose**

The purpose of this Guideline is to assist researchers in understanding what Conflict of Interest is, its ethical significance, and how it should be handled in research contexts.

**Definitions**

The Tri-Council Policy Statement defines Conflict of Interest as follows:

“A conflict of interest may arise when activities or situations place an individual or institution in a real, potential or perceived conflict between the duties or responsibilities related to research, and personal, institutional or other interests.”

More generally, Conflict of Interest arises in any situation in which an individual is expected to exercise judgment on behalf of someone else, but has some ‘outside’ or personal interest that could threaten the impartiality of that judgment. Often the competing interest here will be a financial interest, but it need not be. Typical *non-research* examples of Conflict of interest include:

* A physician who is a) considering which of two suitable drugs to prescribe to a patient, and who b) has a financial interest in the pharmaceutical company that manufactures one of the drugs. In such a situation it might reasonably be wondered whether the physician is able to exercise medical judgment impartially, or whether instead her judgment is going to be swayed by her own financial interests.
* A manager who is a) asked to screen candidates for a job opening, but who b) is involved in a romantic relationship with one of the candidates. In such a situation, it is reasonable to wonder whether the manager would be able to do her duty – i.e., to choose the best-qualified candidate – or whether her judgment will instead be affected by her personal relationship with one candidate.

It is important to note that Conflict of Interest is a situation, not an accusation. That is, you can find yourself in a Conflict of Interest without having done anything wrong. To point out that someone is “in” a Conflict of Interest is not to say that they have done something wrong; nor is it to cast doubt upon their honesty or integrity. It simply means recognizing that the decision-maker is in a situation that is structured in a certain way. What matters ethically is how you handle Conflict of Interest when it arises.

Handling Conflict of Interest appropriately is ethically important for two reasons. First, when Conflict of Interest is mishandled, there is risk that those whose interests are affected by the relevant decision might a) be treated unfairly or b) be harmed. Secondly, there is a risk that doubt will be cast upon the integrity of the decision-making process itself and the institutions or professions it represents. When a judge mishandles a Conflict of Interest, for example (e.g., by failing to recuse herself from a case in which she has a personal stake), she not only affects the fate of those involved in the case, but also risks damaging the reputation of the justice system as a whole. In research contexts, a researcher who mishandles a Conflict of Interest risks jeopardizing the public’s faith in the integrity of university research quite generally.

**Requirements**

The best advice is, where possible, to avoid situations that might put you in a Conflict of Interest. In other words, avoid situations in which you will be expected to exercise professional judgment impartially but in which you have a personal stake, financial or otherwise.

Sometimes situations involving Conflict of Interest cannot reasonably be avoided. In such cases, the best advice is a two-fold approach:

1. **Disclose the Conflict to concerned parties.** For researchers, that includes disclosure to at least the Research Ethics Board. It may also mean a duty to disclose the conflict to participants in a study. (Note however that disclosure on its own is not always sufficient. Even if a researcher discloses to research participants, for example, that she has a financial stake in the outcome of the study, those participants may not know just how to use that knowledge in deciding whether to consent to participate.)
2. **Minimize the amount of decision-making undertaken.** That is, if Conflict of Interest cannot be avoided, its potential impact on decision-making should at least be minimized. This might for example mean avoiding direct participation in key decisions, and leaving key decisions to other, unconflicted members of the research team.