

Legalistic or Inspirational? Comparing University Conflict of Interest Policies

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Abstract

In response to growing public and policy concern about conflicts of interest (COI) in university research, academic institutions in North America and Europe have introduced policies to manage COI. However, depending on their form and content, COI policies can be more or less helpful in the effective management of COI. In this paper, we examine and compare the design and content of COI policies at two Canadian research universities (the Université de Montréal and the University of Waterloo), which we suggest, exemplify two general categories or poles on a spectrum of policy approaches. We describe 1) a legalistic approach that promotes a concise but rigid structure, and 2) an inspirational approach that encourages principle-based deliberation and wider interpretation. Each of these approaches has its particular strengths and weaknesses. We conclude with some recommendations to help administrators and policy makers improve the quality, utility and effectiveness of university COI policies.

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