



OHIO ETHICS COMMISSION

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OHIO ETHICS LAW MEMORANDA FOR TRUSTEES OF PUBLIC COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

I. INTRODUCTION TO THE ETHICS LAW AND RELATED STATUTES

This handout contains general information about the Ohio Ethics Law and related statutes (Chapter 102. and Sections 2921.42, 2921.421, and 2921.43) as they apply to individuals serving as trustees of state colleges and universities. To assist you, this handout outlines, in general terms, your responsibilities under the Ethics Law and related statutes.

The prohibitions of the Ethics Law and related statutes protect both individuals who serve in public positions and the general public. The law includes requirements for financial disclosure by trustees of public colleges and universities, as well as general provisions that condition the conduct of public officials and employees to help protect against conflicts of interest.

- A. Intent:
 - To prevent public officials and employees with conflicts of interest from acting on those conflicts
 - To provide remedies of education, advice, and enforcement
- B. Application:
 - All public officials and employees at every level of government in Ohio, and those who do business with them
 - All trustees of state public colleges and universities are public officials and are, therefore, subject to Ohio's Ethics Law.
 - Limited exception for teachers and other educators with no administrative responsibilities [Ohio Revised Code ("R.C.") 102.01 (B)]
- C. Ohio's Ethics Law:
 - Found in Chapter 102 of the Revised Code
 - Related statutes are R.C. 2921.42 and R.C. 2921.43

II. THE OHIO ETHICS COMMISSION

- A. History
 - Post-Watergate enactment in 1973 [H.B. 55, effective 1/1/74]
- B. Purpose
 - Requiring personal financial disclosure
 - Imposing **criminal** penalties for unethical conduct
 - Establishing uniform review of questions by statewide commissions of the three branches of government

- C. Composition of the Ethics Commission
 - Six **bi-partisan** members
 - Appointed by Governor, confirmed by Senate
 - Staggered, 6-year terms
 - Compensated \$75 per meeting, up to \$1800 per year
- D. Authority of the Ethics Commission
 - Administers Ethics Law (R.C. 102) and related statutes (R.C. 2921.42 and 2921.43) for all public officials and employees at the state, county, municipal, township, and other levels of government *except*:
 - a. Judges and judicial employees [Contact the Board of Commissioners on Grievances and Discipline of the Supreme Court at (614) 644-5800]
 - b. State legislators and legislative employees [Contact the Joint Legislative Ethics Committee at (614) 728-5100]

III. RESPONSIBILITIES AND PROCESSES OF THE COMMISSION

- A. General Duties - Five Major Responsibilities
 - 1. Public Information
 - 2. Advice
 - 3. Investigation and Referral for Prosecution
 - 4. Financial Disclosure
 - 5. Legislation
- B. Public Information – R.C. 102.08.
 - 1. Organize and provide training and information sessions regarding conflicts of interest and financial disclosure
 - Presented 137 educational sessions throughout the state in 1997
 - Sessions given by the Commission are free of charge
 - 2. Create and distribute informational materials regarding Ohio's Ethics Law
 - 3. Provide a master copy of the Ethics Law to agencies for distribution
 - 4. Maintain website of electronic information [<http://www.ethics.ohio.gov>]
- C. Advice – Render Advisory Opinions – R.C. 102.08.
 - 1. The law provides assistance to you as a public official from the Ethics Commission through written advisory guidance to answer your questions about the specific application of the Ethics Law to future actions. You are encouraged to ask questions and we will do our best to answer them.
 - 2. Please do not hesitate to call or write to our office at the telephone and address above.
- D. Investigation – R.C. 102.06.
 - 1. Authority – Analogous to specialized grand jury
 - 2. **Confidential process** – Commission is prohibited by law from disclosing any information about investigations *except*:
 - a. Commission may publicly comment that a complaint has been referred to a prosecutor if no action has been taken within 90 days of the referral
 - Commission cannot comment regarding the merits of its findings
 - b. Accused can request disclosure of a complaint, if the accused has successfully defended the complaint

3. Resolution Authority – After consultation with the accused, the person filing the complaint, and any other person the Commission considers necessary, the Commission or a prosecutor may agree to settle a charge with the accused.
 4. Demand exceeds resources:
 - a. An estimated 18,000 elected office holders and 500,000 public employees subject to authority
 - b. As a result, commission must weigh the relative severity of allegations in order to prioritize which will be investigated
- E. Financial Disclosure – R.C. 102.02.
1. All state college and university trustees are required to file individual financial disclosure statements with the Ethics Commission by April 15th of each year.
 2. These statements aid trustees in identifying financial interests they hold that may present conflicts of interest for them in the performance of their public duties.
 3. The Ethics Commission provides financial disclosure statements to college and university trustees by February 15th of each year.
 4. Financial disclosure statements reflect the entire preceding year's financial interests held by the filer, even if the trustee did not serve during the preceding year.
 5. College and university trustees are required to disclose:
 - Sources of income of over \$500;
 - Sources of gifts of over \$500 (excluding most family members, but including spouses);
 - Investments over \$1000;
 - Debtors and creditors over \$1000;
 - Most ownership and leasehold interests in real property, located in Ohio.
 6. Statements filed by trustees of public colleges and universities are confidential except for any part of the disclosure that reveals a potential conflict of interest. Each confidential statement is individually reviewed by the Ethics Commission to identify sources of potential conflict. These may include a trustee's financial interests, because a trustee may not use his authority to affect his own interests if they have business or regulative relationships with the college or university.
 7. The General Assembly has mandated timely compliance with the deadline. As a result, the Ethics Commission will assess a late filing fee of \$10 per day, up to a total of \$250.00, against individuals who fail to file statements by the deadline.
- F. Legislation – R.C. 102.08.
- Recommend legislation relating to ethics, conflicts of interest, and financial disclosure
 - Recent examples:
 - H.B. 300 in 1986
 - H.B. 285 in 1994

IV. SUBSTANTIVE PROVISIONS OF THE ETHICS LAW AND RELATED STATUTES

General Rule – Whenever the personal financial or fiduciary interests of a public official or employee, his family, or his business associates are involved in a situation before the official or employee, there is an ethics issue.

In addition to financial disclosure requirements, the Ohio Ethics Law contains provisions regarding the private activities of public officials. These provisions deal with four general areas: conflicts of interest; public contracts (including nepotism) and public investments; post-employment, confidentiality, and representation; and, supplemental compensation. These general restrictions are summarized below.

A.

Conflict of Interest – R.C. 102.03 (D), (E), (F).

1. A trustee of a public college or university is prohibited from taking any action, including voting, discussing, deliberating, and formally or informally lobbying, on any matter where the official, his family, his business associates, or others with whom he has a relationship that would affect his objectivity, would receive anything of substantial value [102.03 (D)].
 - a. R.C. 102.03 (D) prohibits a public official from using his authority to secure anything of value that could have a substantial and improper influence upon the official in the performance of his duties. This section prohibits any formal or informal action in a matter where a substantial thing of value may benefit the official, his family, or his business associates.
 - b. The law defines “**anything of value**” to include money, goods, chattels, future employment, interests in realty, and “every other thing of value.”
2. A trustee of a public college or university is prohibited from accepting or soliciting anything of substantial value, including gifts, travel, meals, and lodging payments, and consulting fees, from improper sources including parties that are doing or seeking to do business with, regulated by, or interested in matters before the board or commission she serves [R.C. 102.03 (D) and (E)].
 - a. R.C. 102.03 (E) prohibits a public official from merely soliciting or accepting anything of value if the thing of value could have a substantial and improper influence upon the public official in the performance of his duties.
 - b. “Anything of value” could have a **substantial** influence upon a public official if the thing has a substantial value. The Ethics Commission has stated, for example, that season tickets for a professional sports team have a substantial value and cannot be provided to a public official by a party doing business with or regulated by the public agency [[OEC Adv. Op. No. 95-001](#)].
 - c. A thing of value could have an **improper** influence upon a public official if it is provided by a source that has a direct relationship with the public agency served by the official. Those sources, which are “improper” because of their relationships with a public agency, include parties doing or seeking to do business with, regulated by, or interested in matters before the public agency. Those “interested in” matters might include an association of parties doing business with the public agency.

3. The law also **prohibits a private party, or any person**, from promising or giving anything of value to a public college or university trustee if the thing of value could have a substantial and improper influence upon the public official or employee in the performance of his duties [R.C. 102.03 (E); [OEC Adv. Op. No. 90-001](#)].
 - a. One example of a situation where these restrictions have been applied is travel, meals, and lodging. A public college or university trustee is prohibited from accepting travel, meals, and lodging, from any improper source, which would include parties that are doing or seeking to do business with, regulated by, or interested in matters before the public agency [[OEC Adv. Op. No. 89-014](#)]. A trustee is also prohibited from accepting or using any frequent flyer benefits accrued while in the course of travel in his official capacity, unless the benefits are used in official travel [[OEC Adv. Op. No. 91-010](#)].

B. Public Contract Restraints - R.C. 2921.42; R.C. 102.04.

1. A trustee of a public college or university is prohibited from authorizing or using his position to secure authorization of a public contract for himself, a member of his family, or a business associate [R.C. 2921.42 (A)(1)].
 - a. A “**public contract**” is any purchase or acquisition of any property or services, including employment, and casual, as needed purchases, and any design, construction, alteration, repair, or maintenance of any public property [2921.42 (G)(1)].
 - b. The Commission has stated that a prohibited “**interest**” in a public contract must be definite and direct, and may be either pecuniary or fiduciary [[OEC Adv. Op. No. 78-005](#)].
 - c. The term “**a member of his family**” includes, but is not limited to, a spouse, parent, grandparent, child, grandchild, or sibling. It also includes any other person related by blood or marriage to the public official and residing in the same household with the official [[OEC Adv. Op. No. 80-001](#); *Walsh v. Bollas*, 82 Ohio App. 3d 588 (Lake County 1992)].
 - d. A “**business associate**” is a person with whom a public official is engaged in an on-going business enterprise, such as a partner in a partnership, a co-owner of a business, or an outside, private employer [[OEC Adv. Op. No. 92-003](#)].
2. A trustee of a public college or university is **prohibited from profiting from** a public contract he approved, or that was approved by the board of trustees of which he is a member, even if he abstains from the approval, unless the contract was competitively bid and awarded to the lowest and best bidder [R.C. 2921.42 (A)(3)]. This restriction applies while the official is connected with the public college or university, and for one year after he leaves his position.
 - a. This section prohibits a member of a governing board, such as a college or university board of trustees, for one year from the time he leaves his position, from accepting employment with his public agency, if the employment was authorized or the position was created during his service. R.C. 102.03 (D) (discussed above) also prohibits a member of a governing board from using his position to secure employment from the public agency he serves [[OEC Adv. Op. No. 87-008](#)]. These restrictions do not mean that a former college or university trustee is prohibited from securing employment with the college or university he had served, so long as the board of trustees did not create the position or authorize the employment

during his service, and the former trustee did not seek the employment opportunity until after he left the position of trustee.

3. **Nepotism**

- a. A trustee of a public college or university is prohibited from authorizing the hire of, or using his authority to secure the hire of, or employment benefits for, any member of his family (parents, grandparents, children, grandchildren, spouse, siblings, or any person related by blood or marriage and residing in the same household) [R.C. 2921.42 (A)(1)].

4. **Improper Interest in Public Contracts**

- a. A trustee of a public college or university is prohibited from having an interest in the profits or benefits of a public contract entered into by the institution with which he is connected [R.C. 2921.42 (A)(4)]. The term "connected with" has been defined by the Commission as being related to or associated with the institution [[OEC Adv. Op. No. 87-002](#), [89-004](#), [90-007](#)].

- i. **EXEMPTION:** A trustee of a public college or university is not considered to have an interest in a public contract entered into by his college or university with a private corporation if his interest in the corporation is limited to being a stockholder of less than five percent or a creditor of **less than five percent** [R.C. 2921.42 (B)].
- ii. **EXEMPTION:** A trustee of a public college or university is not prohibited from having an interest in a public contract entered into by the college or university he serves so long as: (1) the purchase is a necessary purchase; (2) the goods or services are unobtainable elsewhere for the same or lower cost, or are furnished as part of a continuing course of dealing started prior to the trustee's connection with the college; (3) the service provided is the same as or better than the service provided to other clients or customers; and (4) the public official does not participate, the contract is at arms length, and the college or university has full knowledge of the board member's interest [R.C. 2921.42 (C)].
- iii. The application of these two exemptions is dependent upon the facts.

Please contact the Ethics Commission for further information.

- b. A trustee of a state college or university is prohibited from authorizing investments, or employing authority to secure investments of public funds in any security, if he, a member of his family, or any of his business associates either has an interest, is an underwriter, or receives any brokerage, origination, or servicing fees [R.C. 2921.42 (A)(2); [State v. Strabala](#) (1993)].

5. **Sale of Goods**

- a. A trustee of a state college or university is prohibited from selling any goods or services to any state entity, except through competitive bidding or as provided by exemption [R.C. 102.04 (B)].
 - i. **EXEMPTION:** Sales to state agencies other than the college or university served are exempted when the trustee completes and files a disclosure of the sale of goods or services, as described in R.C. 102.04 (D), before entering into the sale. The trustee must file the disclosure with the college or university he serves, the state entity to which the sale will be made, and the Ethics Commission [R.C. 102.04 (D)].

C. **Post-Employment Restrictions – R.C. 102.03(A), (B); 102.04(A),(C).**

1. **General Revolving Door – R.C. 102.03(A):**

A trustee of a state college or university is prohibited, during public service and for **one year** thereafter, from representing anyone, before any public agency, on any matter in which he personally participated while he was a member of the board of trustees. For some matters, the prohibition remains in effect for two years [R.C. 102.03 (A)].

- a. A “**matter**” is any case, proceeding, application, determination, issue, or question [R.C. 102.03 (A)(5)].
- b. “**Personal participation**” is any decision, approval, disapproval, recommendation, the rendering of advice, investigation, or other substantial exercise of administrative discretion [R.C. 102.03 (A)(1)]. Supervision of another public official or employee can be, but is not always, personal participation [[OEC Adv. Op. No. 91-009](#)].
- c. “**Representation**” is defined as any formal or informal appearance before, or any written or oral communication with, any public agency [102.03 (A)(5)]. “Representation” includes preparing documents, regardless of whether the individual himself signs them, or they are signed by someone else [[OEC Adv. Op. No. 86-001](#)]. The restriction applies even if the represented party is another public agency [[OEC Adv. Op. No. 93-011](#)]. The restriction does not apply to behind-the-scenes consultation with a client or new employer [[OEC Adv. Op. No. 92-005](#)].

2. **Representation – R.C. 102.04 (A).**

- a. A trustee of a public college or university is prohibited from receiving compensation except from the institution of higher education he serves for any service **rendered personally** on any case, application, or other matter before any state entity, except as provided by exemption [R.C. 102.04 (A)]. Ministerial matters like tax preparation and filing incorporation papers are removed from the restriction [R.C. 102.04 (F); [OEC Adv. Op. No. 89-016](#)].
 - i. **EXEMPTION:** Receiving compensation for providing services on matters pending before state agencies other than the institution of higher education served is exempted when the official completes and files a disclosure, as described in R.C. 102.04 (D), before performing the personal services. The trustee must file the disclosure with the college or university he serves, the state entity to which the sale will be made, and the Ethics Commission [R.C. 102.04 (D)].

3. **Confidentiality – R.C. 102.03 (B).**

- a. A trustee of a state college or university is prohibited from disclosing or using confidential information acquired in his state position, without appropriate authorization. There is no time limit on this restriction [R.C. 102.03 (B)].

4. **Representation - Influence peddling – R.C. 102.04 (A)(C).**

D. **Other Restrictions.**

1. **Supplemental Compensation – R.C. 2921.43 (A).**

- a. A trustee of a state college or university is prohibited from accepting compensation, other than from the college or university he serves, for the performance of his public duties [R.C. 2921.43 (A)]. Private parties are also prohibited from offering or giving supplemental compensation to university trustees [102.03 (F); 2921.43 (A)].

2. **Honoraria – R.C. 102.03 (H)**

- a. The general restriction enacted by the Legislature in 1994 that prohibits a

public official who files a disclosure statement from receiving an honorarium does not apply to any member of the boards of trustees, or any president, of state institutions of higher education. However, a trustee or president is prohibited from accepting honoraria or travel expenses from parties that are doing or seeking to do business with, regulated by, or interested in matters pending before his college or university [102.03 (I)].

3. Rate-Making – R.C. 102.03 (C).

E. Additional considerations

1. Copies of the law – R.C. 102.09 (E).

V. SUMMARY-COMMON SENSE WRAP-UP

- A. Cannot authorize a contract or use authority to secure authorization of a contract for self, family, business associates
- B. Cannot solicit or accept things of value
- C. Cannot disclose or use confidential information
- D. Cannot receive additional compensation for performance of official duties
- E. Cannot represent parties on matters in which public servant involved
- F. Cannot participate in matters where public servant has a conflict of interest – i.e., where something of value will result for self, family members, others

As previously stated, this information summarizes the Ohio Ethics Law and related statutes in Chapter 102. and Sections 2921.42, 2921.421, and 2921.43. These laws are criminal statutes designed to protect the public from decisions that could be influenced by improper conflicts of interest for those who serve the public interest. Although the majority of public officials and employees meet or exceed these standards, these provisions serve to assist in deterring or punishing the few who do not. Your careful consideration of the prohibitions is appreciated.

The Ohio Ethics Commission is an independent agency of state government charged with interpreting and administering the Ohio Ethics Law for many state and local public officials and employees. The Commission has been serving the public, and state and local governments, since its formation as part of the Ohio Ethics Law in 1973. If you have any questions about how these restrictions apply to you, or for more information about the Ethics Law in general, please contact the Ohio Ethics Commission at (614) 466-7090.

This memorandum was prepared by the Ohio Ethics Commission for informational purposes only. It is not intended as a substitute for the laws referenced or Ethics Commission advisory opinions construing those provisions.

WHEN IN DOUBT, CALL THE ETHICS COMMISSION--(614) 466-7090

Check us out on the Web at <http://www.ethics.ohio.gov>