

The Architecture School at Z University holds an annual contest to determine the top individual project work by a student in a senior year studio course. The winner competes in an intercollegiate competition whose prize is a prestigious, and generous, fellowship for the purpose of traveling abroad to observe great architectural works first hand. Senior individual project work in studio courses is a big part of the architecture school's curriculum, in which students usually invest large amounts of time, energy, emotion and ego. Prize winning senior studio project work tends to reflect quite favorably upon the supervising faculty member --in the same way that teachers of prize winning musicians or painters have their reputations thereby enhanced. Architecture School faculty judge the contest, however, no faculty member is allowed to be a judge of his or her own student's work. Jane, a senior student, who wants to enter her project in the contest doesn't think that faculty who teach senior studio courses should be involved in the judging at all. She communicates this view to the Dean of the Architecture School, who raises the issue at a faculty meeting. One faculty member says that, in his opinion, Jane is concerned because she thinks several faculty members don't like her personally. Another faculty member says he doubts this is the case, but that, in his opinion, even if some faculty members don't like Jane, they wouldn't allow this to affect their decisions as judges.

Assume that the issue of whether to exclude Architecture School faculty who teach senior studio courses from judging in the contest comes to a vote at the faculty meeting, and that you are a faculty member in the Architecture School. How do you vote, and why?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: You should vote for the change in judging procedures that Jane wants. Because prize winning studio work strongly redounds to the credit of supervising faculty, the current judging procedures create a potential conflict of interest situation. Such a situation is one in which circumstances could develop that would bring into question a judge's ability to render impartial evaluations. Sometimes when there is a potential conflict of interest other factors in the situation, on balance, justify not replacing the decision maker --e. g. exams in small courses where the instructor knows the identities of the student exam takers. In the case of the Architecture School's contest, however, it doesn't seem that any educationally compelling reasons justify having senior studio course faculty serve as judges. This would seem no more justifiable than it would be for the organizers of the intercollegiate competition described in this case to invite the studio professors of the finalists from different colleges to serve as the judge's panel.

Assume that in the circumstances described in the preceding question, the Architecture School faculty votes not to change its judging procedure for the contest, and that you are a student who, like Jane, objects to the procedure. What do you do next? Justify your answer.

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: Among the possible courses of action available to you, you would be well within your rights to bring the vote of the Architecture College faculty to the attention of the Provost, or other academic officer in your university to whom the Architecture College Dean reports. You would be justified in asking her to review the situation, and, based upon her review, to direct the College of Architecture to change its judging procedures for the contest this year, so that senior studio professors do not serve as judges. The Provost may not be eager to tell the architecture faculty that it may not judge the competition in the way it wants to, but, it would seem, the Provost has a duty to do so. The university has the ultimate responsibility to assure fairness in that way that faculty deal with students.

Case from the March 6, 1997 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. Copyright Robert Ladenson, Center for the Study of Ethics at the Illinois Institute of Technology, 1997.