Reporting Outside Professional Activities
David Listler

From colleagues with whom I have spoken, it seems that not everyone recognized the importance of this disclosure process, and that our current forms are so detailed and hard to figure out that they provide little incentive to comply. Accordingly, we have simplified the forms, and the annual updates will be done as part of the annual report to the Institute on outside professional activities.

This is not the case, however, you will only need to disclose that the financial interest exceeds the threshold, not how much it actually is. Whatever we may think about the effort involved, the regulations do require this disclosure and we do need to comply. As we all know, even completely innocent connections can be misunderstood if not disclosed, so the disclosure will provide a measure of protection for PHS/NSF investigators and for the Institute.

These new forms were created and the disclosure process modified in order to be available in time for this year’s disclosure of outside professional activities to MIT. We intend to monitor the process and to work with the Committee on Outside Professional Activities to make any necessary changes that will make it function even better in the future. If you have comments or suggestions as you go through the process this year, please send them to me (listler@mit.edu) or to Bill Porter (wporter@mit.edu), who is the chairman of the Committee on Outside Professional Activities.

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universities, such as the University of California at Berkeley, have a similar reputation.

These universities have built well-balanced programs that leave them well-poised to be the leading universities of the next generation. Their success clearly involves a diverse faculty. I would propose that there are other important characteristics of their success. These include a well-balanced student body and a learning environment that foster well-balanced growth.

Balance is the key, and balance comes from a recognition that undergraduate education should not be focused upon optimizing how much information the students are taught. Instead, it is about teaching the student how to learn and how to become a life-long student. It is also about opening vistas and viewpoints to allow flexibility in thought. While many technical schools seem focused on long hours of work and homework, a balanced education requires time for other areas of learning; organized extracurricular activities, social interactions, athletics, and significant time for talk between the students, perhaps among the most important of educational experiences.

Courses that emphasize problem sets have been a mainstay of the technical universities. Problem sets teach problem-solving techniques, and this is a crucial skill taught by these universities that is valued not only in the pursuit of science and technology, but more recently by investment bankers, financial analysts, and others in areas where technical skills have found new applications. However, my impression is that recently professors at technical universities are using problem sets not only to teach how to solve problems, but are increasingly using them to introduce the students to a wide variety of technical topics. This is not to say that homework sets, tests, and hours upon hours of study are not central aspects of the educational process, but when studying begins to squeeze out all other activities (as it does at several of the top technical universities) the educational process is not enhanced.

Students need time to be introduced to other areas, and they need time for personal growth. They need time to read the classics, to expand their communication skills, to investigate the arts, to understand history and politics, and they need time to mature and to interact with their peers. They very much need time for extracurricular activities. For most students, the college years are the first time that they are out on their own and making most of their decisions by themselves. Their growth as an individual is just as important as their growth in knowledge.

It is notable that Stanford's unique educational environment includes athletic teams that are competitive in almost all sporting areas with the very top universities in the country. Thus, while a number of East Coast universities maintain that athletics must be kept at a Division III level to prevent a diminution of the educational mission, Stanford has managed to consistently produce top athletes in a wide variety of sports (including the major sports) while also producing what is unquestionably academic excellence.

Athletics is a central part of a well-rounded education. There are the old saws about the importance of learning teamwork, learning about your own potential, experiencing new activities, and health benefits of sports. However, these objectives can largely be met with a physical education program. Intercollegiate competition, especially at the highest levels, inspires a dedication and enthusiasm not seen in intramural sports or local interscholastic competition. This is not to degrade those pursuits, but leaders are exceptional individuals that excel when given exceptional challenges. Furthermore, at the young ages that these individuals prepare to attend college, these athletic dreams are frequently foremost in their thinking. Those universities wishing to recruit these future leaders must necessarily provide the challenges these student athletes seek.

Academic excellence, athletic and other extracurricular opportunities, a diverse faculty, and a balanced learning environment: These are the characteristics that talented students and potential future leaders look for when choosing a university. A university that excels in all of these characteristics is going to have a well-balanced student body. It is the interaction among these students that is perhaps the most important aspect of the university educational experience. Their discussions with one another, both relating to academics and other aspects of their formative years, are the foundation of the learning experience. For these discussions to achieve their maximum possible impact requires a well-balanced student body, of the type that will be drawn to a well-balanced university. The "nerd" label, still associated with the students of some technical universities, will continue to hamper their efforts to diversify the educational experience of their students.

While new opportunities for expanded educational mission will likely arise for the top technical universities in the country, these universities will necessarily need to decide whether such an expanded educational mission might interfere with what has up to now been their fundamental mission, namely that of providing the finest technical education possible. Most of the universities will likely decide that continuing to provide the finest technical education need remain their fundamental focus. However, a few of these universities might find that their unique capabilities will allow them to somewhat alter their mission and aid in producing a new generation of leaders better able to address the many technical challenges they will face.

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