



November 22, 2016

Dr. Ann C. (Nan) Crouter
Dean
College of Health and Human Development
Penn State University
325 Health and Human Development Building, 301 CHHD
University Park, PA 16802

Dear Dean Crouter:

My name is Evlondo Cooper, and I'm a Senior Fellow at Checks and Balances Project. We're a public watchdog blog focused on bringing greater accountability to government officials, corporate managers and lobbyists on behalf of our readers.

On October 7, 2016, I sent a [letter to Penn State Provost Dr. Nicholas P. Jones](#) asking for his help in better understanding the School of Hospitality Management's (SHM) relationship with the hotel industry and the origins of this university-corporate partnership. We are particularly interested in learning more about the nexus of Professor John W. O'Neill's employment with the University and his private consulting practice.

Based on the University's response to our earlier inquiry (provided by Vice President for Research Neil A. Sharkey), as well as our own reporting, we see strong evidence that PSU Professor John O'Neill is using University resources to operate a private consulting practice.

As the former Director of SHM and current Director of the Center for Hospitality Real Estate Strategy, Professor O'Neill also [appears to be using the imprimatur of the University to increase the credibility to corporate-funded research on behalf of his current clients](#). This research includes a study funded by the American Hotel & Lodging Association (AH&LA), the hotel industry's lobbying arm, that produced findings highly favorable to the hotel lobby.

The study even featured [Penn State's branding and logo](#).

Unless we're missing something, this conduct appears to violate the following PSU ethics policies:

- [HR80 \(Private Consulting Practice\)](#)
- [HR91 \(Conflict of Interest\)](#)
- [RPO6 \(Disclosure and Management of Significant Financial Interests\)](#)

Notably, the University's position on private consulting practices of faculty states:

“... private consulting may create the potential for or perceptions of a conflict of interest between the faculty’s financial interests created by the consulting and his/her related Penn State research.”

Additionally:

“The name of the University is not in any way to be connected with the service rendered or the results obtained. The faculty member must make it clear that his or her consulting work is a personal matter.”

These are strong and clear safeguards against the sort of conflicts that Professor O’Neill seems to be creating. We note:

- Professor O’Neill is the lead academic supporting the hotel industry with research and in the media. So much so, that when the University named him director of SHM, he was praised for his “strong ties to industry.”
- Under Professor O’Neill’s leadership, the school formed an “industry advisory board” to “strategically advise SHM on industry trends.” The advisory board is comprised of more than 20 industry executives, including those from Marriott International, Hyatt and Hilton Worldwide.
- Professor O’Neill lists more than 40 consulting clients on his CV including Marriott International, the AH&LA and Hilton Worldwide, entities that are also closely associated with SHM.
- There is no discernible infrastructure for Professor O’Neill’s private consulting practice including no standalone website, which is nearly universal among solo consulting service providers.
- Professor O’Neill’s LinkedIn profile links to his University biography at www.personal.psu.edu/faculty/j/w/jwo3/, a “personal” page that only lists his PSU contact information.
- And, his profile on a website designed for hospitality consultants run by the International Society of Hospitality Consultants (ISHC) also [lists his University contact information](#), with his address, phone number, fax number and personal website provided by Penn State.

We ask that you respond to the following questions:

1. Have you provided Professor O’Neill with written approval to engage in private consulting?
2. If so, when was it provided?

3. If not, who provided approval, and when was it provided?
4. Has Professor O'Neill been involved in fundraising for the University from his private sector clients?

During the summer of 2015, Regis Becker, Penn State's first chief ethics and compliance officer, "urged 'anyone who has witnessed or suspects illegal, unethical or unsafe conduct to report it promptly so that it may be addressed' and stated that 'the university will not tolerate wrongful conduct,'" per the Centre Daily Times.

With this letter, we are doing just that. Our readers look forward to your prompt response.

Regards,

Evlondo Cooper
Senior Fellow
Checks and Balances Project
evlondo@checksandbalancesproject.org
504-521-7440