

Author's Commentary on "Travel Funds"

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Travel Funds

The objective in writing this case was to encourage readers to consider the ethical issues related to responsible spending of travel funds. Many graduate students in the sciences are privileged recipients of research assistantships that afford funds for travel to conferences. In many a restaurant during a conference trip, colleagues remark, "Let's get appetizers and desserts - it's on the grant!" Even when more economical hotel accommodations are readily available and convenient, professors and staff may choose more luxurious sites. This commentary is not a proposal that the cheapest available accommodations should always be chosen, but that the economical options should be considered, given the public nature of the funding source. What choices would be made if one's own money were funding the travel? Are we responsibly spending the taxpayers' money when we travel and stay at a conference site? One could consider selecting an economical hotel that meets standards for cleanliness, safety and convenience to the meeting location instead of a more lavish location. Government-funded researchers have decided to stay at a more luxurious hotel simply because the grant will cover the expense; if their own money were to be used to pay for the hotel, they would have chosen other accommodations.

In this case, Edward is responsible for selecting the meeting site and has selected one of the most posh hotels in the D.C. area. Clearly, other options are more affordable and equally comfortable for participants. Since Edward is responsible for this decision, he, too, should consider the public nature of the funding source for this meeting. It appears that his decision is based solely on comfort, convenience and service, with inadequate attention to cost. Furthermore, Edward and his staff stay at the hotel despite living in the D.C. area. This action is an additional misuse of government funds.

Holding the annual meeting at Edward's work location seems like a viable option. His government work site has several meeting facilities that can handle groups of

this size at virtually no cost. In weighing the time and energy it would take to arrange for catering services and shuttle services at his site, Edward would have to judge whether it would be the better choice. Based on his previous record for such decisions, it is not likely that Edward would select his work site for this function. Edward does listen earnestly to the participants' comments about the cost and excessive luxury of the meeting site and consequently opts for a less expensive location for future meetings. For this reason, this case serves as a "best practices" example.

It could be argued that nothing illegal or immoral is occurring when travel funds from governmental grants are used to stay at luxurious accommodations. The spending is all out in the open, and the researchers are the "public" who benefits from these travel awards. However, this information is not commonly shared among the general public that also contributes to these travel funds through its taxes. The public should be allowed to decide how its money gets spent, but generally remains ignorant of such allocations. How would a lower-income, single mother of two children feel about some portion of her tax money funding the participants at this meeting? Does she really have a say in the spending of her tax dollars for government-funded travel? Ideally, congressional representatives consider the overall good of their constituents when deciding on such matters. Excessive travel luxuries should be regarded as an unacceptable use of the public's tax money; rather, these monies should be used to fund moderate travel, accommodations and meals. Guidelines could be created to determine appropriate travel expenditures based on typical costs for a given city. Accommodations exceeding these guidelines should be paid with personal finances. Similar spending brackets could be designed for meal allowances.

Attractiveness is an important consideration for meeting organizers, especially for non-obligatory meetings such as conferences and workshops. Especially in the case of international conferences, organizers must consider airport accessibility, weather and city desirability among other details. Certainly greater international participation would be likely at a February conference in San Diego than in Oswego, New York, although hotels and restaurants are more affordable in the latter city.

Several practices could be undertaken to reduce costs to travelers at a conference. Although it is not standard practice, meeting organizers could facilitate the creation of a list of participants who would like to share a hotel room. Shuttle services could be arranged for groups arriving at the city airport simultaneously. Providing local

train and bus schedules is yet another way to encourage meeting participants to opt for more economical travel costs.

The per diem food allowance is another point of discussion. Given the public nature of this funding source, grant funds for food should be spent responsibly. The "let's get appetizers and desserts" mentality is an irresponsible perspective. If one considers the daily amount spent on food whether or not one is attending a conference, perhaps grantors should fund less than the entire amount spent on travel meals. According to the U. S. Department of Agriculture's Food Stamps Program, recipients of other governmental sustenance programs such as welfare receive a daily food allowance of roughly \$3.60. (A non-income, three-person household is eligible for \$329 per month in food stamp benefits.) The Department reports that the average monthly amount of benefits for food stamp recipients in 1998 was about \$71 per person. Perhaps travel meals funded from governmental sources should be on par with this other governmental program for public sustenance.

Given that travel funds often derive from governmental agencies, and thus our public tax money, researchers traveling on these funds should carefully evaluate their practices in spending the public's money through the use of grant funds. The funding agencies themselves can also institute more thorough guidelines for responsible travel expenditures. The NSF, for example, specifies that funded air travel must not exceed the cost of round-trip, economy airfares; however, no mention of economy is indicated regarding accommodations or meals in the NSF's Proposal Preparation Instructions. As recipients of "publicly" funded travel awards, many directors, researchers and students can improve their spending decisions to use public funds efficiently and ethically.

References

- National Science Foundation Grant Proposal Guide, June 2001 (<http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2001/nsf012a/start.html>).
- U. S. Department of Agriculture Food Stamp Program (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/menu/about/about.htm>).