

Ethics Case Study

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This question is adapted from an ethics case study that appears in [Currents Magazine](#), published by the Council for Advancement and Support of Higher Education.

You are the head of public relations for a small liberal arts college. Each year, the college recognizes two or three alumni with its “Outstanding Alumni Award.” This award is designed to “recognize a single outstanding achievement by a graduate to his or her professional field, or to reward a cumulative lifetime of professional achievements by the graduate.” This is the highest honor bestowed by your college. A committee of deans, vice presidents, the provost, the president, and you choose the award winners by secret ballot.

After reviewing the nominations, which follow a pre-established format, the committee is ready to vote. Then the college president rises and says, “Some of you know that one of the nominees, Bob Smith, is being solicited for a gift to the college. It would be the largest gift in the college’s history. I think that giving him this award would all but guarantee his decision to donate. He has my vote.”

Then, your boss, the vice president of development, chimes in. “I also want to mention Ellen Johnson, another of the nominees. I know she doesn’t have a strong nomination on paper, but she has given us \$6 million over the past 10 years. I think it would be nice to give her some additional recognition. This award would be perfect. Let’s vote.”

What do you do?

- a) Cast your vote for Smith and Johnson, because that’s what your president and your boss want you to do.
- b) Quietly vote for the candidates you think are best. It’s ethical because you made up your own mind, and besides, it’s a secret ballot.
- c) Stand up and say that the vote has been biased, that choosing a candidate for money is morally bankrupt, and that you intend to abstain from the vote.
- d) Stand up and reiterate the purpose of the award, which is for professional lifetime achievement. Acknowledge that gifts are important to your institution’s future, but that linking donations and this award could create future problems. Suggest that the committee consider creating a new award to honor major donors and reserve the current award for its original purpose.

For more insight on ethics dilemmas, visit the following:

- [IABC Code of Ethics for Professional Communicators](#)
- [IABC ethics quiz](#) (see Section 3: Code of Ethics)
- *Communication World* article: [Under the Microscope](#)
- *Communication World* article: [Ethics in the Real World](#)
- Presentation: [Business Ethics: The Communicator’s Role](#)
- *Communication World* article: [Rescuing PR’s Reputation](#)