# DISCUSSION KEY FOR CASE #4

# Ethical Use of Interns

**Case Summary**:

*As director of public relations for a major pharmaceutical company, you are under increasing pressure to show measurable results with a limited budget. The CEO asks you to develop an effective campaign to engage public support for the company’s application to the Federal Drug Administration for approval of a new drug research shows to be highly effective at controlling asthma for children and to have no known side effects. As one of your key tactics, you plan a series of community meetings for parents. Your CEO is pleased with the tactic. You have an unpaid intern, working for class credit and public relations experience who has completed course work and is looking for a job in a tight market. He wants public relations experience that will benefit his job search but you have not yet given him meaningful tasks that will help him build his skills. He has been answering the phone and filing while you have been out of the office in meetings for hours at a time. You don’t have the budget to hire a mailing service or temp to get the invitations out, track RSVPs or check-in guests at the informational meetings. You want to assign the job to the intern. Should you do this?*

**General Guidance:**

For information about the ethical use of Interns, including whether they should be paid or unpaid and what activities you may ethically ask an intern to do, see Professional Standards Advisory #17 – Ethical Use of Interns: <http://www.prsa.org/AboutPRSA/Ethics/ProfessionalStandardsAdvisories/PSA-17.pdf>

1. **Identify the ethical issues and/or conflicts.**

Is it ethical to use an unpaid intern in a for-profit company to do PR work that would otherwise have to be done by a paid employee or PR firm?

Is it ethical to ask a PR intern to do the menial work of mailing invitations and checking in guests at meetings, especially if the internship is unpaid?

1. **Determine internal/external factors likely to influence your decision**.

Employers value work experience when hiring. Job candidates who wish to be competitive willingly accept unpaid positions to gain work experience. This raises questions for both the employer and vulnerable job seekers. The question for employers is: “Does the position being offered meet the legal standard set by federal law for an unpaid internship?” For the student, the question is, “Can the internship be a significant career builder as opposed to just a mindless activity that provides little or no immediate academic or work experience?” For both parties, there are ethical questions to consider.

1. **Choose key values that apply.**
* **Advocacy:** We serve the public interest by acting as responsible advocates for those we represent. We provide a voice in the marketplace of ideas, facts, and viewpoints to aid informed public debate.
* **Honesty:** We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with the public.
* **Expertise:** We acquire and responsibly use specialized knowledge and experience. We advance the profession through continued professional development, research, and education. We build mutual understanding, credibility, and relationships among a wide array of institutions and audiences.
* **Fairness:** We deal fairly with clients, employers, competitors, peers, vendors, the media, and the general public. We respect all opinions and support the right of free expression.
1. **Consider parties who will be affected by your decision and evaluate the public relations professional’s obligation to each one**.

The three parties most affected in this case are the interns themselves, the firm hiring them, and the student interns’ educational institutions.

For the student interns, there are several key questions to ask:

* Are they getting valuable experience and learning from this internship, or are they being asked to do menial tasks such as making copies and filing?
* Are they incurring unreimbursed costs such as having to pay college tuition, transportation, clothing, membership fees, etc.?
* Are they being asked to do unethical things such as posing as researchers to gain marketing insight or competitor information or posting fake client reviews on social media sites?

For the hiring firm:

* Is there a system in place to provide oversight of the interns’ activities?
* Are the interns being asked to do work that would otherwise be done by paid employees?
* Is the hiring firm billing clients for the interns’ work?

For the Educational Institutions:

* Is an internship required for graduation that requires the student to pay tuition?
* If tuition is being charged for the course credit, is the institution providing any value for this tuition such as faculty oversight, additional coursework, follow-up with the employer, written reports, grading, etc?
* Is the work being required of the intern worthy of course credit and how does the institution establish the job content for internships?
1. **Select ethical principles to guide your decision making.**
* **Free Flow of Information**: Preserve the integrity of the process of communication. Be honest and accurate in all communications.
* **Disclosure of Information**: Be honest and accurate in all communications. Investigate the truthfulness and accuracy of information released on behalf of those represented. Reveal the sponsors for causes and interests represented. Avoid deceptive practices.
* **Enhancing the Profession:** To build respect and credibility with the public for the profession of public relations. Report ethical violations, whether committed by PRSA members or not, to the appropriate authority.
1. **Make a decision and offer a brief rationale.**

On the surface, there is nothing unethical being asked of the intern in this scenario, since it is work that many newly hired PR associates could be asked to do. However, all of the work given to the intern to date has been fairly menial in nature, and the student is working unpaid and covering his own expenses for a learning experience that he is not getting. Therefore, it would not be appropriate to ask him to do this additional work unpaid. Also, because this is work that you would otherwise need to hire someone to do, it likely does not meet the Federal guidelines for an unpaid intern. The ethical thing would be to pay the intern to do it, hire a temporary worker to do these tasks, or reassign existing employees to do it.