



# Academic Tutors/Advisors and Students Working in Partnership: Negotiating and Co-creating in “The Third Space”

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In this perspectives piece, we argue that technology can be used to create and facilitate “Third Space” advising, via a model of “flipped advising” which focuses on the development of quality staff–student partnerships. “Third Space” advising, using technology, encourages students and staff to work together to create and validate knowledge, connect experiences, and improve the learning culture of the organization. It also aligns with Hockings’ (2010) definition of inclusive practice in learning and teaching. While so much focus has been on the development of the advisor, the concept of Students as Partners (SaP) and “The Third Space” offer important lenses within which to shift the focus of advising practice away from the development of advisors and toward the development of staff–student partnerships, with a view to improving the impact and outcomes on students themselves.

**Keywords:** personal tutoring, academic advising, third space, students as partners, co-creation

## ACADEMIC TUTORING AND ADVISING IN “THE THIRD SPACE”

We, the authors, share a mutual interest in personal tutoring (United Kingdom) and academic advising (United States) as a means of supporting students to achieve autonomy, independence, and to realize their potential. Advising and tutoring adds significant value to teaching and learning, particularly assisting students in transition to negotiate their liminality and adjust to a new and unfamiliar learning environment as well as subsequently transitioning out of higher education (HE) and continuing their lifelong learning journey. To that end, we have collaborated over the last 3 years to investigate the impact of technology to facilitate staff–student relationships, uncover the student voice, and to improve advising and tutoring practice. These collaborations have emerged through our work with NACADA (The Global Community for Academic Advising) and UKAT (UK Advising and Tutoring).

We recognize that while there has been a lot written in the United States on academic advising, the literature on personal tutoring in the United Kingdom is limited. Most scholarly articles, both in the United States and the United Kingdom, are written from the perspective of the academic advisor or personal tutor. As Felten (2016) pointed out when he examined the literature on threshold concepts, students are often investigated as the objects of study rather than as partners in enquiry.

Similarly, the student voice is largely absent from discussions about the impact of academic advising and tutoring on student success and this must now be uncovered, examined, and analyzed. The concept of “The Third Space” (Bhabba, 1994; Gutierrez, 2008) offers an exciting opportunity to connect the work we are doing with the Students as Partners (SaP) agenda and reflect on how we might start to reclaim the student voice in tutoring/advising. “The Third Space” is not just a physical space, rather a term used to define spaces where hybrid identifications are possible and where cultural transformations can happen. Third Spaces enable cultural hybridity, where culture, identities, practices, and differences can be explored without an assumed or imposed hierarchy. For Gutierrez, this allows us to explore Third Spaces as zones of proximal development, which encourages “attention to the learning and development that happen in the movement across various temporal, spatial, and historical dimensions of activity” (p. 153). In an advising/tutoring context, this can open up key avenues of dialog and enquiry to support true partnership working and facilitate learning. Importantly, Third Spaces can support and foster equality, diversity, and inclusion in the curriculum and, to this end, may allow for more improved student experiences by revealing possibilities for improving access and participation and redressing the marginalization of certain student groups and identities within institutions and disciplines. Such groups include Black, Asian, and Ethnic Minority students, as well as LGBTQ + students, disabled students, and those with mental ill health. The Third Space approach is therefore well aligned with Hockings (2010, p1) definition of inclusive practice in learning and teaching: “the ways in which pedagogy, curricula, and assessment are designed and delivered to engage students in learning that is meaningful, relevant, and accessible to all. It embraces a view of the individual and individual difference as the source of diversity that can enrich the lives and learning of others.” Here, we argue that The Third Space can be used to support advisor/advisee interaction, as long as there exists an intentional focus on inclusion through enhanced advisor support and an emphasis on access and participation, with particular attention to students’ socio-cultural context. This is particularly the case given the impact of the Covid19 pandemic on HE, which has exacerbated existing disparities.

In this article, we argue that the “Third Space” can help us understand how the student voice can be harnessed to conduct further enquiry and research in this area, as well as consider the transferability and implications for advising and tutoring practice. This can inform further research which will impact advising pedagogy and highlight the importance of dialog between tutors/advisors and students as equal partners in the tutoring process. The terminology used to describe tutoring and advising differs across international contexts. For the purposes of this article, we refer to (academic) advising throughout and do so in hope of capturing the breadth of personal tutoring and academic advising functions.

Here we apply the concept of “The Third Space” to advising by considering blended learning environments where technology enhances learning and advisor–student partnerships—known as the “flipped advising” approach (Steele, 2016a). We hope that by

reflecting on the use of technology in advising we can apply its use to the co-creation, validation, and negotiation of knowledge and staff–student experiences. Advising can take places in many different spaces. Some of these spaces are intentional and formal such as advising sessions, courses, and workshops, as well as through use of technologies ranging from telephone calls to the use of social media. Other spaces are informal such as conversations that occur during chance encounters between advisors and advisees. Through these multiple opportunities to meet, the student voice is heard and conversations between advisors and advisees are conducted. The relationship between the intentional allocation of synchronous and asynchronous learning and teaching activities across institutions can influence the quality of engagement with the student voice. Difficulties arise when institutions determine the allotment of the space and advisor time to meet with students by using return on investment (ROI) management strategies. Often, institutions using these management strategies seek the highest advisor/advisee ratios in the pursuit of financial efficiencies (Steele and White, 2019). Gordon (1994) highlighted years ago the many reasons why it is so difficult to engage students in a developmental advising approach which encouraged learning and requires the voice of the student to be heard. Gordon offered 10 reasons. Three of her reasons offer critical insight to the impact of limited advisor and student interactions in the development of spaces to develop meaningful conversations:

- Advisors do not have the time to become involved in the type of advising that requires frequent contact with one student; advising loads are too high for personal contact.
- Students perceive that advising involves only scheduling and registration, equating advising with high school “guidance.”
- Institutions do not require contacts with one advisor over a period of time, so advisors cannot force students to have advising sessions. (pp. 71–72)

Gordon’s insights suggest a complex interaction of variables that can contribute to reducing the quantity and quality of the student voice that can be heard in the physical, on campus, advising space. These range from the constriction of intentional spaces designed to meet with students, to students not believing that their advisors are the institutional representatives with whom to engage in conversations regarding their academic and career goals, or to help them determine how they can become successful students.

From a North American perspective, Fosnacht et al.’s (2017) study offers great insight into this phenomenon. The authors examined over 200 diverse institutions and over 50,000 full-time first-year students and found that the typical first-year student met with an advisor one to three times during his or her first college year. They also reported that the number of meetings varied across student subpopulations and institutional types (p. 74). It is our contention that face-to-face meetings between advisors and advisees that occur only at the frequency of one to three times during the first-year questions the mechanisms used institutionally in the allocation of advising and tutoring meeting

spaces and this impacts the quality of the student voice that advisors typically hear.

To improve the quantity and quality of the space that advisors and advisees have at their disposal, we need to move beyond the physical space allocated by the institution and embrace a blended environment and incorporate into advising practices virtual learning spaces facilitated by technologies such as learning management systems (LMSs) or virtual learning environments (VLEs) and e-Portfolios. As Steele (2016a; 2016b) stated, these technologies provide advisors with the opportunities to create an intentional learning environment organized by NACADA’s Concept of Advising (defined below): an advising curriculum and focused on developing instructional activities, aligned with learning goals, to help students develop their academic and career goals. Not only do LMSs, VLEs, and e-Portfolios provide the opportunity to structure the student learning experience, they also provide the opportunity to increase contact with students through the communication tools offered by these systems, something which can lead to increased capacity for quality conversations and partnership between advisors and advisees. Through use of discussion boards, quizzes, reflective questions, and short and long written responses, the opportunity to engage students in reflection on their goals and plans is also significantly increased.

Kraft-Terry and Kau’s recent study (2019) endorses the positive aspects of adopting this approach. The authors created an advising curriculum for vulnerable students through a method designed to ensure that learning objectives remain central to the learning process. Instructional activities aligned with the learning outcomes were placed in an LMS that served as the platform for delivery. Students in four categories of academic risk were targeted for supportive intervention. Through the evaluation of direct-learning evidence, gathered through assessment, an improvement in student learning occurred. This approach also assisted the advising unit to engage in improving their instruction by use of direct learning measures to evaluate instructional effectiveness. The critical point to note here is that, through the use of learning technologies, advisors and students can enter into a more interactive and frequent SaP constructive, dialogic relationship. The enhanced SaP relationship supports the creation of artifacts, by students themselves, of their goal setting and planning, guided by the advising curriculum and helping to curate the student learning experience. Student artifacts of goal setting and planning can be selected and reflected upon by the student in the context of other academic and non-academic work. In turn, these artifacts can become foundational elements included in an e-portfolio system and can assist students with self-paced, independent, and autonomous learning strategies. McIntyre (2011) describes an ePortfolio as “. . . simply a website that enables users to collate digital evidence of their learning. Each student can maintain and expand their own individual ePortfolio over the duration of a class, a degree, or career” (p. 1). With the use of an e-Portfolio, students can share evidence of their learning and experiences with those who support their learning, showcasing examples of learning, and helping advisors to understand better the student voice (Ambrose et al., 2014). Or, as Rowley and Munday (2014)

state, “ePortfolio development encourages students’ ‘sense of self’ through a process of skills-uptake such as organization; collecting and classifying of evidence; utilization of tools; and reflection on and in discipline-specific knowledge, learning, and tasks; and higher order thinking skills such as synthesis and evaluation of learning.” (p. 78)

Here, we discuss what this can tell us about future enquiry into staff–student partnership and the student voice in advising as well as reflecting on the use of technology and blended environments to facilitate and develop advising pedagogy. We draw on our personal experiences of working with both staff and students in the professional spheres encompassing learning, teaching, and research. The interest in the student voice in advising has had a mixed history. Some scholars focus on what the institution or the advisor does in the relationship. As Lowenstein (2009) emphasized in his important and widely-quoted works in North America, we must advocate an “advising as teaching approach.” Other North American writers have emphasized the student voice as critical in the advising encounter (Auguste et al., 2018). Because much of what is discussed and reflected upon here is based on our own conversations, thoughts, reflections, and writings, we aim to provoke further discussion, to suggest ways forward and transferability of approaches, and uncover possibilities for improving the blended advising space, rather than to make claims about impact. We consider the conversations, relationships, and the shifting identities that take place in “Third Space” advising and consider the implications of this on staff–student partnership and the development of the student voice. We hope that our thoughts and experiences will encourage those working in an advising capacity to re-assess their practice and invest in new and exciting ways to co-create “The Third Space” in advising, in partnership with students, and using appropriate technologies.

## ACADEMIC ADVISING/TUTORING AND STUDENT SUCCESS

We are living in a volatile political, socio-cultural, and economic policymaking landscape, both within and outside of the HE context. In recent years, the mission and values of HE, on a global scale, have changed significantly and universities are now positioned as not only a force for social change but a means by which to achieve ambitions of social mobility, social justice, equity, and inclusion. At present, the impact of the Covid19 pandemic has encouraged a wide-scale upheaval of all learning, teaching, and student experience infrastructure, and an emergency pivot to online provision. We are now working within a massified, diversified, and globalized HE system, at a time of great uncertainty, which places emphasis on the importance of designing blended pedagogies for equity and social justice as well as progression and student success. This context places a renewed focus and interest on the role of the academic advisor to realize this agenda and to make change evident on the ground. Indeed, it has long been acknowledged in the United States that academic advising is central to student persistence and success (Donaldson et al., 2016; Dumke et al., 2018). Similarly,

in the United Kingdom, the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) has placed a renewed focus on the personalization of learning and on advising as a means of improving student retention and progression. Indeed, advising is a critical means of engendering a sense of community, belonging, and connectedness among students and staff (Lochrie et al., 2018). Advisors are key players in fostering cohort as well as individual learner identities, particularly assisting students to navigate liminal spaces and embrace new learning opportunities.

We work in universities of varying sizes in both the United States and the United Kingdom. What connects our experience is that our institutions have a diverse student body and place a firm focus on academic advising for student success. The missing piece of this jigsaw, however, is the absence of the student voice in realizing this powerful agenda for change. Historically, advising in the United Kingdom has been under-resourced, under-researched, and removed from mainstream narratives of teaching and learning. It is passive and transactional, removed from student engagement processes, and focused on the development of the advisor (through training and support) rather than assessing the impact of positive dialog with students. The same may be said to be the case in the United States, as Fosnacht et al.'s (2017) study quoted previously suggests that students only see their advisor one to three times during their first year.

We, as a sector, understand the impact of advising from an institutional and advisor's perspective but we lack the insight that the SaP agenda can bring to our practice. We must understand the student context if we are to make real strides forward. The potential now exists to harness the power of staff-student partnerships, especially in a blended and predominantly online space, to further the advising agenda and to ensure that it has the maximum impact on student self-efficacy and independent learning, at a time of acute learner vulnerability. There are many opportunities to explore what it means to practice advising in “The Third Space,” in partnership with students, to explore the impact that this has on student culture, practice, and identity. At the same time, we should also explore further the benefits of working with students to capture the collective voice and in co-creating the learning experience. In institutions, we talk about designing an advising system or an advising curriculum; rarely do we hear of involving students in this design, which goes against the partnership and co-created, indeed, co-curated approach—these concepts surely represent a new frontier in advising and must be at the heart of shifting the focus away from passive, transactional encounters and toward developing meaningful staff–student partnerships.

In a bid to connect the complementary agendas of academic advising and student success, several frameworks have emerged to improve the quality and consistency of advising to ensure that it becomes a key driver in social mobility and the realization of this student-centered pedagogy. The NACADA (2016) Concept of Academic Advising (CoA) is one such framework: it is student-focused and comprises three parts. It (1) acknowledges an advising curriculum that organizes content to support students to develop their academic and career plans; (2) highlights the pedagogical approaches of advising that advance critical thinking, and (3) explores student learning outcomes of academic

advising. The framework incorporates the key principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which ensures that advising practice offers flexible learning environments that value individual learning differences and promote equity and inclusion. The focus is on championing an advising curriculum which guides learners to acknowledge that information and knowledge can be acquired in multiple ways and posits that there are a wide variety of ways for students to demonstrate what they have learned (and what they know) as well as explore their culture and identity. It suggests that there are multiple ways for advisors to engage with learners to focus on their interests, challenge them to succeed, and motivate them to learn (Hall et al., 2012). The CoA is compatible with introspective advising practice, which “requires critical reflection on the student's part in order to bring about meaningful conversations that help the student to understand their purpose in [college/university]. As such, [introspective advising] is question-based, concerned with developing a rapport that helps the student become self-reliant and confident in their decision-making” (Parker and Williams, 2017). In a blended environment, such opportunities cannot be ignored.

The concept of “The Third Space” can assist in placing staff–student partnership at the forefront of advising pedagogies. We advocate here that the NACADA CoA and the principles of UDL are critical to fostering introspection and thus to the realization of “Third Space” advising where students are partners in the process and can navigate effectively the blended online and on campus continuum. Furthermore, we argue that technology represents a key way in which to do this, by employing a pedagogy of “flipped advising,” one that is more “curatorial, negotiated, reflexive, and inter-disciplinary,” as noted by Potter and McDougall (2017). Here, we conceptualize “Third Space” advising as being a blended arrangement of space where technology is used to enhance and support face-to-face staff–student relationships and pedagogic dialog, leading to a greater understanding of culture and identity and helping to remove hierarchical structures which can often be barriers to learning. This offers an additional, virtual, space to support and advise students and to facilitate rapport beyond the physical spaces of the campus and classroom.

Examples of students and advisors working in a blended “Third Space” environment have emerged from the College of Engineering, at the University of Florida. The advising team used an LMS to ask students a series of questions related to their academic program as well as what they do when not focusing on their studies. The three questions were:

- What are you enjoying about your Major?
- How are you spending your time outside of studying and going to class?
- How does this outside activity relate to your professional and/or personal development?

Some examples of student responses are listed below:

- “I really like how it incorporates both chemistry and mathematics, and really forces to me to work hard to understand concepts. Being an engineering major keeps me busy, and the fast pace can make my life very difficult, but I prefer it over a slow-paced major. I also really like the

collaborative aspect to it, especially in ENC3246, where I get to work with people who are interested in the things I am interested in”

- “I am spending my time outside of class exercising. I also volunteer in the radiology department of Shands Hospital. I am involved in many different organizations such as Freshmen Leadership program, Vietnamese Student Organization, American Institute of Chemical Engineers at UF, and in club beach and indoor volleyball.”

By engaging students in these types of questions before the session, the advisor has a wealth of additional background information to help place the student’s experience in context. The student’s experience, culture, and identity are at the heart of the advising narrative and their progress is tracked over time. When presented with this approach at the recent NACADA Annual Conference in October 2018 faculty and professional advisors responded with these comments:

- “I see an opportunity in this becoming somewhat of a ‘triage’ to help make my office become more efficient. The LMS provides resources for students that normally wouldn’t come up until an initial advising appointment. As a result, my advising can become more productive.”
- “The opportunities are endless. It is a great way to empower students to take charge of their education while providing advisors the ability to involve them in valuable conversations. The biggest challenge is just the time it takes to develop a curriculum and initially set up the LMS.”

Advisors are clearly able to see the value of working in partnership with students to co-create “Third Space” advising; students are able to articulate and locate their experiences within the context of advising and reflect on their learning journey and use blended learning environments in order to do so.

## TECHNOLOGY AND ADVISING AND TUTORING—CREATING “THE THIRD SPACE”

Technology for advising can take on many forms and can also encourage staff and students to work together, outside of conventional on-campus spaces, to promote student success. The LMS or VLE are key technological interfaces for “flipped advising.” Other technologies to support advising include ePortfolio systems, student dashboards, early alert systems, social media, and video-conferencing systems. Here we focus specifically on the potential of the LMS to constitute “The Third Space” in advising and suggest ways of using this technology to facilitate better staff–student partnerships. However, there are many positive examples of how e-Portfolios can be used for a Flipped Advising approach. A robust example is provided by the State of Minnesota with its efforts in creating a space to help it citizens and students develop artifacts that address academic,

career, financial, leadership, and personal plans and be uploaded into an e-Portfolio (GPS Life Plan, 2019).

First, an LMS can be used as a “Third Space” mechanism through which to co-create an advising curriculum in a way that cannot be achieved by other means (Steele, 2015, 2016a,b). It can encourage staff–student partnership based on a typical understanding of the student lifecycle and help to capture data on learning analytics which can be used to drive the process. The curriculum can be constructed and created by staff and students together, based on mutual knowledge and understanding of key points in the student year, such as welcome, orientation, and induction, where advising can assist students to negotiate barriers and overcome challenges and help students to adjust to using different technologies in their learning. It can be used as a suggested program of topics for group advising sessions where groups can identify and discuss key topics and themes (Calcagno et al., 2017). This can be used to ask questions about the students’ hopes, fears, motivations, and aspirations. It can normalize the anxieties that all students face, such as finding their way around campus, using technologies, getting to grips with assignments and assessments, and interacting with their advisors and peers. Typical advising curricula include expectations, missions, values, career goals, and planning, critical thinking, decision-making as well as policies and procedures, transferable skills, and knowledge. In a flipped approach, this can be set up practically in the LMS in several ways including via embedded resources, discussion for a, and student questionnaires. The opportunity to complete these activities in a blended “Third Space” environment has the potential to reduce anxiety about encountering new experiences by giving tasks for students to reflect upon and work through before the formal discussion takes place, for example, arrival at university, completing the first assignment, finding a graduate job. Advisors and students can work together, in partnership, to unpack these perspectives, to challenge one another, and to reach mutual decisions about support and to agree ways forward.

Second, in flipped advising, students are encouraged to complete activities/modules in the LMS beforehand. These activities are based on structured reflection and encourage students to engage critically with concepts and topics before the face-to-face session and should form part of their scheduled learning activities. Students are invited to offer their perspective and perceptions which can include learning strategies, assessment and feedback, peer learning, and professional development. Face-to-face sessions are therefore focused less on passively imparting information from the advisor to the student and more on developing a co-created dialog with students about their personal reflections and perspectives, using the work they have completed beforehand (Steele, 2015, 2016a,b). In the background, the LMS provides a form of “institutional memory” for advising where interactions can be recorded and facilitate deeper and richer conversations. This approach has the potential to encourage focused face-to-face conversations, where advisors can use open and structured questions to understand the student(s) context, engage with them to create

meaning from their knowledge and experiences, and discuss collaborative goal setting as a form of co-creation. It is intended that students are empowered by this model and feel trusted to offer their experiences and perspectives, which encourages them to see themselves as equal in the advising process. Indeed, the work of Calcagno et al. (2017) suggests that student input into this process, and the co-design of activities to facilitate tutorial discussion, was particularly impactful. In the context of Covid19, these techniques can be especially critical as predominantly online learning spaces present additional challenges for belonging and connectedness, especially achieving a blend between synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities, and to strike a balance between those which are tutor-facilitated and student-led.

Finally, “The Third Space” advising approach, negotiated through flipped and blended advising pedagogy, removes many of the barriers to learning that are typically encountered within the classroom, particularly in one-to-one advising conversations. Indeed, in the run-up to arrival, students report that their key concern is meeting people and making friends. Students also report that they place considerable importance on the quality of the relationship that they have with their advisor and that it is important to them that they feel supported (Braine and Parnell, 2011; Small, 2013). Students report that they also want specific types of structured support, particularly around professional development planning (PDP) (Braine and Parnell, 2011). That said, students report being more comfortable discussing academic concerns with advisors but are reluctant to discuss personal or pastoral issues (Hixenbaugh et al., 2006). Students report that they find interactions with their advisor far more meaningful when this is facilitated through technology and then applied in a group tutorial or advising context (Calcagno et al., 2017). In addition to this, students feel that the facilitation of group dialog, rapport, and discussion helps them to see their advisor as being more approachable. Finally, students also report advising as being pivotal in helping them to get to know one another and to foster a cohort identity and, as mentioned above, through the use of dialog and discussion (Calcagno et al., 2017). Again, in the context of Covid19, a flipped advising approach can help to harness the student voice, peer engagement, and co-curation.

A “Third Space” advising approach using the LMS to support flipped advising can help to address the concerns and opportunities outlined above, utilizing a dialogic approach and using the advantages of online learning spaces to break down barriers to participation and engagement. First, the completion of activities and the curation of learning resources in advance of the session can encourage students to engage fully with the process. By doing so, more time is spent in the core advising process (i.e., building rapport, discussing perspectives) and on having a meaningful discussion in synchronous sessions, rather than on peripheral issues which are often encountered when a student and advisor are approaching a face-to-face

meeting “cold,” with no prior knowledge or experience, nor of one-another. This self-paced, asynchronous activity helps to provide higher-quality advisor–student time which is something that students crave (Kraft-Terry and Kau, 2019). Second, the discussion of topics associated with academic development can help to build trust and rapport. When done collectively, with tutor-facilitated peer group activity (using the LMS or other learning technologies) students do not feel singled out for requiring structured support, rather they can see that their anxieties are shared and can engage in a form of self-help. Moreover, the advisor can use this information to work in partnership with students to reduce these anxieties and to encourage them to think deeply and critically about their needs, future goals, and plans.

The higher-quality partnerships built via this process can arguably encourage students to raise thorny and delicate personal/pastoral issues with their tutor. We argue that an advisor–student partnership based on mutual discussion, trust, and respect can help students to share information that will help the advisor support them to overcome difficult challenges and situations. Finally, the LMS can be used to raise specific topics for discussion and as a way to connect students with one another, encouraging student–student partnerships. This has a direct impact on helping students explore their own identities. There are ways advisors can encourage students to work in groups, via the LMS, to tackle questions about the process of learning, to offer shared insights, and to use the online “Third Space” to acknowledge and validate their individual and collective knowledge, perspectives, and experiences.

## CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE ENQUIRY

In this article, we argue that technology can be used to create and facilitate “Third Space” advising, via a model of “flipped advising” which focuses on the development of quality staff–student partnerships. “Third Space” advising, using technology, encourages students and staff to work together to create and validate knowledge, connect experiences, and improve the learning culture of the organization. While so much focus has been on the development of the advisor, the concept of SaP and “The Third Space” offer important lenses within which to shift the focus of advising practice away from the development of advisors and toward the development of staff–student partnerships, with a view to improving the impact and outcomes on students themselves.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

EM wrote and amended the article, with contributions of content and revisions by GS and DG. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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